

Increasing Feedback Opportunities: Learning the Ropes Together

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Rationale

Feedback has been recognized as a phenomenon significant to explaining and predicting behavior in organizations. In the last twenty years, the study of feedback-seeking behavior has been one of the most active research domains in management (organization behavior). An increasing number of studies have examined how employees take active roles in the feedback process and seek out feedback themselves (Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007). From this context, feedback serves to explain and modify human behavior, both from individual and organizational perspectives. While feedback research does not extend to teaching and learning specifically, application and extension can be made from this body of literature to the practices of teaching and learning in experiential education settings. Feedback appears in the organizational literature under many guises; it is seen as a relational property linking various units of analysis (e.g., individuals, dyads, supervisor to work group, parent organization to subsidiary) and at various levels of abstraction (Morrow, 1982). It is also defined as actions taken by (an) external agent (s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Feedback, the response listeners give to others about their behavior, has been viewed as an essential ingredient in communication (Ogilvie & Haslett, 1985). According to Ogilvie and Haslett, feedback provides important information on group interactional processes and group performance (; Ammons, 1956; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Nadler, 1979; Vroom, 1964), it increases effectiveness of a group's performance (Erez, 1977; Nadler, 1979) and it provides information about work environment (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; O'Reily, 1977), yet the process of feedback is poorly understood (Ilagen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). According to Ashford and Cummings (1983), feedback literature historically focused on performance appraisal in which employees receive feedback from their bosses during the annual performance review. They challenged scholars to move beyond this notion of feedback to understanding various ways that employees seek and use feedback in their everyday work lives. They proposed that individuals actively seek feedback in order to have more control over the outcomes of their behavior. From an organizational settings perspective, they argued that feedback-seeking behavior is an important resource for individuals to resolve feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. They also stated that "feedback seeking plays an important role in clarifying the relative importance of diverse goals and in helping employees assess their personal competence in regard to a task" (Madzar, 1995, p. 337) as it acts as a subset of all the information that is available to individuals in their work environment.

As a managerial concern, feedback to employees can pose several challenges to many organizations as well. Review of the literature on feedback-seeking behavior claims that failure to seek feedback may have a detrimental impact on the goal-setting process (Morrison & Weldon, 1990), on managerial effectiveness (Ashford & Tsui, 1991), and as

a consequence, may reduce the accuracy and fairness of the performance appraisal process (Madzar, 1995; Morrison & Bies, 1991).

Ashford and Tsui (2003) believed that feedback-seeking behavior has never been more important, both as an employee practice and as a managerial concern. They observed that today's increasingly diverse and multicultural workforce implies that many workers may find themselves in feedback vacuums, as they may not know how others view them unless they seek feedback directly. The challenges affecting employees working on a full-time, part-time, or temporary basis also impact students who are enrolled in experiential education settings including internships and service-learning courses. It is imperative that site supervisors and faculty who sponsor or supervise students placed in site settings understand how important it is for all parties to be able to provide feedback. Student learners are new to particular site environments/organizations/tasks, and site supervisors are often new to the idea of embedding student learners in their work environments, so a feedback cycle would be helpful.

Research indicates that feedback can help newcomers learn the ropes in the workplace; feedback allows new people to improve their performances, consider opportunities for development, and maintain their productivity (London, 1997). More effective learning can be achieved by students when there is opportunity and space for them to express their ideas and receive feedback from their site supervisors, faculty mentors, and peers – all in an effort to add value and meaning to the overall experiential learning process.

One application of the need to incorporate the findings of the feedback research to experiential learning comes from recent experiences of a faculty member when a senior majoring in communication secured the media promotions internship of her dreams. The student knew what the internship meant; 90 hours of working on site, keeping a weekly journal, writing a communication theory-based reflection paper, and having her site supervisor send her faculty advisor a performance evaluation at the end of the semester. The student was prompted to reflect in areas that were subjective, objective, and personal achievement related in her paper and journal. She wrote of all that she was learning about herself, the industry, and how much fun she was having. At the end of the semester the site supervisor's evaluation of the student's performance offered a different perspective. While it included the fact that the student has a lot to offer upon application and focus, it also identified areas for improvement such as the need to ask more questions, assume less, take notes more, arrive early, and stop wearing low-cut shirts with straps in an office setting. The faculty member felt certain that if more feedback opportunities (formal as well as informal) had been in place the student would have been better prepared for her first job which would come soon after graduation. This was especially true because the internship site supervisor opted not to discuss any of her final evaluation with the student. The feedback activities offered here attempt to answer the question, "How might student learning in experiential education settings be better if the teaching and learning included more opportunities for students to receive and give feedback throughout their on-site learning?" The benefits of changes in feedback practices include helping students enrolled in experiential education courses, bolstering the ongoing working relationship between higher education institutions and specific learning sites, and ensuring that individual site supervisors and faculty share student placement experiences that are even more meaningful.

Objectives

This project provides feedback opportunities designed to a) improve individual student performance, b) allow for the consideration of opportunities for further development, c) maintain desired productivity d) adjust to their site performance expectations, and e) enhance understanding of the important role feedback plays in the workplace.

Description of the Activity

Feedback practices are adjusted each semester at The University Speaking Center. The center offers oral communication peer tutoring and workshops in support of the institution's Speaking Across the Curriculum program. The mission of the center is to support clients in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent oral communicators. The center is staffed by 40+ undergraduates, two graduate students, and two faculty supervisors who have reduced teaching loads. While the feedback practices of one particular academic course are covered in detail here, it is important to note that feedback is a significant part of the culture of this particular community of practice. All staff members complete a required three-credit communication course before they go on to be either paid part-time employees or student-interns enrolled in a 1 to 6-credit experiential education course of study. By its very existence the center serves as an experiential education laboratory where student staff first learn to work at the center and then learn through their work in the center. This offers all staff involved a unique perspective on students as experiential learners. It is important to note that *all* or *full* staff include students who are in training, graduate assistants, part-time paid, and interns. The three-credit seminar course which serves as staff training is *Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum*. It explores the principles of Communication Across the Curriculum and applies them to peer tutoring, interpersonal communication, listening, group communication, public speaking, training, and pedagogy for the purpose of preparing *Communication Consultants* in the Speaking Intensive program. It is the required academic study attached to consultant hands-on training. Students who enroll in this semester long course do so with the intention of working for the center as paid employees or interns for one to two semesters after they complete the course. The center serves as the site where students do their experiential education work. Upon successful completion of this experiential course, students are able to a) apply major theoretical concepts in the areas of communication noted above, b) apply pedagogical practices fundamental to teaching adults/training, c) engage in collaborative efforts to include practice sessions, test critiques, role-play, and group discussion, and d) apply peer tutoring and training of theoretical concepts and practical applications. During every semester the role of feedback is examined as part of *Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum*. As a result, the way feedback is collected, organized, managed, and utilized for this class is constantly changing. When considering adding more formal or informal feedback to an experiential education course, faculty should ask themselves many questions to fully understand the teaching and learning potential of feedback.

Question # 1: How might feedback connect students who have already completed the course to those currently enrolled?

In *Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum*, feedback is collected from students enrolled in the course so that areas of confusion or alienation can be identified early and managed well. When ten to fourteen new students are suddenly dropped into a thriving student-run organization as part of a three credit course, the result can be very complex and very negative. What can be done to minimize the effects? For *Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum* this was a tough question because the students enrolled did not feel free to discuss what was not working for them with their faculty member. To overcome this barrier one of the peer managing consultants on staff has been given the responsibility of serving as liaison for all newcomers. The managing consultant gives and seeks feedback, formal and informal, from students in the class both on their class work and center experiences as they relate to experiential learning. The goals of the feedback include helping to make changes where needed in every aspect of the work done in the center and to offer additional explanation and/or hand-holding. The managing consultant also sits down with each member of the class half way through the semester to gain more formal feedback. Questions asked at this meeting mirror the questions addressed to the current staff. They include:

1. "What is working especially well in our organization?"
2. "What is not working?"
3. "What can the leadership do to make your job even better?"
4. "What additional comments or concerns do you have?"

This gives current students in the class an opportunity to seek and give meaningful feedback. It also helps them see early that every staff member has a voice. Whenever possible the managing consultant sits in on the *Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum* class discussions and student presentations to offer feedback in these forums as well. Over the course of the last four years this feedback practice has resulted in less destructive drama during the course and a higher number of trained students returning the next semester to work.

Question #2: In what ways can the feedback collected from site supervisors be more useful?

Studies in Communication Across the Curriculum involves formal collection of feedback from supervisors twice each semester. Half way through the semester feedback is collected from all center supervisors. This feedback provides the students enrolled a better understanding of their performance and it identifies needed improvement. Areas for which performance feedback is sought are specific to the duties of each student enrolled. They include contributions to committee work, professionalism, teamwork, disposition, and demonstrated desire to learn. Feedback collected half way through the semester is not reviewed by the faculty of record for this class. It is collected and presented privately to each student in the class by either a graduate student employee or the peer managing consultant. The goal here is to give the students enrolled the

opportunity to know how their actions at work are being perceived. A student underachieving in their committee work would be told that their contributions are not meeting the course expectations. The student is then informed of the grade impact relating to their performance. They would next be encouraged to identify changes they could make to remedy the perception. Whether the student makes changes or not is up to the individual student. However, the student is subject to ongoing review for as long as they remain on staff. At the end of the semester the faculty of record collects performance feedback for each newcomer from the full staff. That feedback is presented as a formal written report. The students are encouraged to identify from the report areas for improvement that they will work on when they return the following semester.

Question # 3: How can the role of students engaged in experiential learning processes be enhanced through feedback collected from those they serve as well as those they serve with?

At the university speaking center feedback is collected from all of the clients who come in for tutorials so the staff can understand how their work is perceived by their clients and how they are making a difference. For those enrolled in the course, the client feedback offers important insight as to which performance behaviors are working and which need to be improved. Students often reflect in their journals about the usefulness of getting meaningful feedback from those they serve. Feedback is also collected from all staff members not enrolled in the course. This tradition is completed individually on paper at the end of the semester. Feedback plays a minimal role in final grading, and copies are presented in a formal report to individual students enrolled. This allows the enrolled students to know how their contributions and participation adds value to what everyone does at the center, plus it identifies areas for further improvement.

Question # 4: What role can feedback play in teachable moments?

Experiential education offers infinite opportunities for teachable moments. These moments are ripe for feedback behaviors. When difficult tutoring situations arise, feedback seeking and giving behaviors are in the forefront of staff conversations. This can take the form of enrolled students seeking insight or staff members looking to offer and seek assistance. This is when those working at the center are most likely to take part in feedback seeking and giving behaviors. Other teachable moments involving feedback happens both in the classroom and in teams of two when students work on final projects. In any of the noted teachable moments, feedback practices play a tremendous role in inspiring, empowering, and educating students enrolled to improvise, retain, and/or modify their behaviors.

Question # 5: As a result, what do the students produce?

Students produce results as desired and needed by the hour. They keep the mission of the Center alive and running through their commitment and performance. They facilitate greater oral communication skills in their clients. The student employees instill a sense of trust, confidence, and ongoing support to the students engaged in

experiential learning process as well as to the student clients as positive role models. The center allows the students enrolled to practice what they teach to their clients during their experiential learning process, therefore they learn and demonstrate effective interpersonal, listening, time management, leadership, and coordination skills. They become more aware of the personal strengths that they can work with and areas for improvement they can target when they return the following semester. These transferable skills are seen in increased effectiveness in actively seeking additional responsibilities to test and apply their own skills. Above all, they incorporate the changes suggested through the feedback cycle, thus reinforcing the value of feedback practices.

Question # 6: What do the students accomplish?

In addition to increased self-awareness and a sense of place at the center, students exhibit confidence and competency in their personal and professional arena. Professionally, they accomplish a sense of belonging for themselves and help their peers and clients achieve the same. They acquire knowledge to produce effective presentations and tutoring sessions. They assist their student clients by offering feedback that recognizes their strengths and identifies areas for improvement. They accomplish the ability to speak their minds and make appropriate suggestions /recommendations that might benefit the advancement of the center and the staff. Personally, they accomplish a sense of pride when they recognize and see the impact they have made in the lives of their fellow peers and student clients. In the process, they also learn to treat their fellow students and clients as they wish to be treated.

Implementation of the Activity

In preparing students to engage in active feedback faculty need to create a safe environment for students to speak their minds and be open to conversations about controversial issues. It is important to provide honest and genuine feedback that represents previous experiential education situations in response to students' comments and concerns. Providing students with guidelines that take their journaling, observing, and role playing experiences from personal thoughts to meaningful reflection leads to feedback seeking or giving behaviors. The process also helps students to understand the significance of productive feedback behaviors both in the classroom and on site. While some of the above ideas also apply in preparing site supervisors to engage in feedback, more focus needs to be placed on building faculty relationships with students and site supervisors. Faculty need to also engage in communication with those being served at our experiential education sites for the effective and efficient implementation of the feedback practices. In order to add more feedback to experiential education course work faculty need to develop mechanisms and create safe opportunities in which feedback can be given and received. Faculty need to create verbal, written, and/or electronic surveys for collecting feedback from students and site supervisors. Faculty need to plan for individual interviews with all students in their course calendar, provide opportunities for students to seek and give feedback, and offer them written assignments to write about their experiences. Faculty also need to give students and site supervisors feedback surveys early to help them know what to expect and to keep track of their students'

progress during the semester. It is important to get all parties involved in the responsibilities of feedback.

Evaluation of the Activity

Many of the traditional experiential educational assessment strategies such as journaling, writing a paper, or presenting a speech can be applied to feedback. In employing these strategies its important to focus on improving individual student performance, creating opportunities for providing feedback and maintaining of desired productivity. These strategies provide a better chance for students to adjust their site performances during the semester, to focus on their performances and development, and to understand and appreciate the important role that feedback plays in the workplace.

Reflections on the Activity

Faculty who seek to add more feedback strategies to their experiential education courses need to view themselves as the hub of a bicycle wheel. The faculty hub guides and directs all feedback in such a way that the spokes support and sustain the momentum of the wheel. In this case, the momentum refers to students' experiential learning process. Experience with feedback frames the importance of consistent communication with students, builds and maintains relationships with all parties, demonstrates flexibility, and provides opportunities for modeling good feedback behaviors and making connections to career and life-related issues. Potential trouble-spots a teacher might encounter include resistance on the part of all parties, lack of feedback seeking and giving skills, apathy, missed deadlines, and unwillingness to give up control and dishonesty. No matter what types of challenges, surprises, and successes one might encounter in the process of implementing feedback practices, a robust feedback mechanism mirrors the effective performance and sustainability of a successful organization.

Helpful Advice to those who will add feedback strategies to their experiential teaching and learning:

Communicate – Let everyone know what is going on through formal and informal methods.

Develop flexibility – No matter how flexible you think you are, you will need to be more so.

Be Open – We cannot anticipate what we will receive in the way of feedback.

Solicit Help – Find a mature responsible student with strong interpersonal and written communication skills. Enroll the student for independent study credit and appoint as your feedback coordinator. You will appreciate the help if you are careful to recruit a qualified student.

Expect – Anticipate learning from and changing your feedback practices with the passing of each semester.

Remain Ethical – Many gray areas may present themselves when working with students in the area of feedback. Keep in mind that some behaviors can be changed while others cannot. Plan to meet each student where they are individually and work forward from there.

Avoid Preconceived Perceptions – Do not prejudge students engaged in experiential education.

Strategize – Have in place both formal and informal strategies for implementing feedback practices at the start and end of each semester.

Document – Keep a “paper trail” of everything formal and informal that is collected because it may be significant to learning.

Believe – in yourself, in your students, and in the process.

Pitfalls to Anticipate

Sometimes the feedback collected paints a picture that requires follow up. When receiving inconsistent or alarming feedback it is always useful to get additional feedback from as many different parties involved as possible. This is best done without making note of the feedback already received and it needs to be done before moving forward with action. In this situation it is important to let the persons who sent the feedback in question know that you are looking into the matter and will get back to them. This triangular process of collecting feedback helps faculty to avoid unforeseen biases that might influence the perception of students and sites. It is not enough to simply collect and give feedback. All parties must be held accountable for their feedback statements. Faculty must respond in a timely fashion to the feedback they receive. While doing so faculty must keep a check on their perceptions of the students and site supervisors where seeking appropriate behaviors are concerned. Changes in behaviors often take place over time.

Implementation of Feedback Practices have Changed Over Time

Over the course of time we have moved from 100% face-to-face feedback to a model that collects feedback face-to-face, on paper, and electronically through use of *Blackboard*TM course management’s essay function. Face-to-face feedback is common with students enrolled in the experiential education course, however, is not always possible to collect feedback in person from the rest of the staff due to the ever-growing demand of the services offered at The University Speaking Center. We have learned that solicitation of feedback from the full staff is not something we can omit from our normal semester practices.

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Guide for Sample Questions:

Faculty can develop questions for their feedback practices based on what they want to assess as outcomes. Not all the questions listed below might seem fit for a given course of study and/or site. However, there may be some commonalities that could be applied.

Sample feedback questions for students and site supervisors:

To be completed by experiential education students:

What is the most important thing you have learned about yourself as a result of your experiential education experiences?

What questions remain unanswered?

What changes have you found yourself making at your experiential education site as a result of your experiences?

What can your site supervisor do to better help you to accomplish your tasks?

What can your faculty member do to assist you in your work on site?

What is working especially well for you at your experiential education site?

What is not working well on site?

What do you wish to personally accomplish beyond the course objective?

In what ways have any of the course objectives been met or extended through your work on site?

What role has feedback played in your learning process?

To be completed by experiential education site supervisors:

What is the most important contribution made by one of our students at your site this semester?

What changes can our students make to better serve your site?

What are the strengths of each of our individual students at your site?

What are the areas in need of improvement for each of our individual students at your site?

What can the faculty of record do to better serve our partnership?

What part of this student placement is working especially well for you and your site?

What part of this student placement is not working well for you and your site?

What role has feedback played in your relationship with our student(s)?

What role has feedback played in your relations with our faculty?

How has feedback helped in building and maintain relationships with our students?

How has feedback helped in building and maintain relationships with our faculty?

What changes do you suggest we make in our feedback process?

How has the variety of feedback practices put into place here helped you to achieve your own goals for this partnership?