Feedback revisited: Adding perspectives based on positive psychology. Implications for theory and classroom practice

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Consequences of the perspective of positive psychology on feedback.
- The importance of taking into account the emotions evoked by feedback.
- Challenging the over-simplification of feedback about the self and praise.
- Feedback on character strengths as a type of feedback on the self.
- Progress feedback as a complement to "gap" feedback.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Teacher feedback has mainly been described from the point of view of cognitive psychology. We aim to add to the body of knowledge on teacher feedback by considering the perspective of positive psychology. We describe possible consequences of two concerns of positive psychology: (1) the importance of (positive) emotions and (2) character strengths. We argue that emotions are an important issue in the discussion about feedback and challenge the over-simplification of feedback about the self. As a way of stimulating positive emotions and character strengths, we propose to focus on progress feedback as a complement to gap feedback.

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1. Introduction

Feedback is a fundamental aspect of everyday teaching. Researchers from all over the world, for instance from New Zealand (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the United States (Black & Wiliam, 1998), Sweden (Shute, 2008), the Netherlands (Voerman, Meijer, & Korthagen, 2012a), the United Kingdom (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008), and Germany (Brand, Reimer, & Opwis, 2007) acknowledge the importance of feedback. Hattie (2012b) even describes feedback as one of the most influential

factors in learning — it is higher on the list of influential teacher interventions than, for instance, the quality of instruction.

The body of knowledge on feedback is extensive, as a lot of research has been done during the last decades, culminating in review articles covering a large number of studies. Examples of such review studies include the works by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), Black and Wiliam (1998), Hattie and Timperley (2007), and Shute (2008). The aim of feedback is generally described as being to close the gap between current performance and a goal and effective (learning-enhancing) feedback is described as specific and goal-related (Alder, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Duijnhouwer, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Sadler, 1989; Shute, 2008). In this article, we will follow Duijnhouwer's definition of feedback (2010): "information provided by an external agent regarding some aspect(s) of the learner's task performance, intended to modify the learner's

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cognition, motivation and/or behavior for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 16).

Giving learning-enhancing feedback may be more difficult than most teachers realize. The existing body of knowledge reveals that over one third of all feedback interventions have a negative impact on learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Shute, 2008). This phenomenon can be illustrated using the following example (Voerman & Faber, 2010):

> *Cheerful and full of positive expectations, Isabel entered her new school. After just one week, she came home crying each day…What happened?*
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> *In this first week, she got acquainted with her new teachers and fellow-students. She also received feedback from her mathematics teacher several times. Basically, although she could not reproduce the feedback literally, she understood from his messages that she was clumsy and stupid. Whether or not he really said or even meant to say this, her conclusion was clear: she was stupid. The impact was dramatic. She hated math, she felt teachers were stupid, school was awful and she wanted to go back to her primary school. And concerning mathematics she stated: "I will never learn math, it's just too difficult."*

The feedback Isabel's teacher gave her apparently did not serve its purpose: it did not enable her to learn better, nor did it motivate her to perform mathematics. On the contrary, she was ready to give up on mathematics and even on school. Boud (1995) describes this phenomenon as follows: "We write and say things which can readily be taken as comments about the person rather than their work and in doing so we link in to the doubts and uncertainties which they have of themselves and our remarks are magnified at a great cost to the self-esteem of the persons concerned" (Boud, 1995, p. 44). Hounsell (2003) also described the influence of feedback in defining self-perceptions:"…… feedback could also have powerful effects on students' self-confidence, buoying up some, while leaving others 'devastated'" (p. 72). Thus, feedback not only has an impact on learning, but also on the emotions a person experiences and their views of their strengths and weaknesses.

Most studies on feedback appear to be based on a cognitive view of learning. And although important, we felt that this emphasis on cognitive views might also lead to a limited understanding of the concept of feedback, as the example above might illustrate. Hence, our goal is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about feedback by introducing another perspective on learning into the discourse by discussing the consequences of this perspective on the conceptualization of feedback. There are several possible perspectives that might add to our understanding of feedback, such as positive psychology, social constructivism, or social psychology. Because describing all possible alternatives is beyond the scope of this article, we chose the perspective of positive psychology to revisit the concept of feedback and to discuss consequences of this view for both theory and practice of giving feedback.

Positive psychology in general revolves around three concerns: positive emotions, positive individual traits or character strengths, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). We will discuss the first two of these concerns: (1) positive emotions and (2) character strengths in relation to the concept of feedback. By considering these two concerns of positive psychology, we reflect on three themes with regard to the concept of feedback. The first theme is the relation between (positive) emotions, learning, and feedback (see the example above).

A second theme refers to the types of feedback that have negative effects on learning according to five main reviews of research on teacher feedback: Black and Wiliam (1998); Hattie and Timperley (2007), Kluger and DeNisi (1996), Sadler (1989), and Shute (2008). These include praise and feedback about the self. Based on the outcomes of research in positive psychology regarding the influence of positive emotions and awareness of character strengths on learning, we aim to reconsider the views of the impact of praise and feedback about the self for learning.

A third theme is based on the views of positive psychology about positive emotions which are broadly described as being content with the past, happiness in the present, and hope for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In line with this view, we will discuss *progress feedback* as a complement to gap feedback. Duijnhouwer (2010) defined progress feedback as information that performance has improved compared with previous performance in a similar task. This type of feedback might stimulate students to believe that they might not yet have mastered the subject or skill, but in due course they will. In this way, progress feedback contributes to hope for the future as a positive emotion.

2. Method

First, we studied five reviews of research on feedback that were cited in most other articles on feedback, based on the SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index). These were the meta-analyses by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) based on 131 articles, and Hattie and Timperley (2007) based on a synthesis of 500 meta-analyses. Moreover, we studied the literature reviews by Sadler (1989) based on 49 articles, by Black and Wiliam (1998) based on 250 articles, and by Shute (2008) based on 103 articles and 24 books and book chapters.

Second, we searched for sensitizing concepts, based on the combination of (1) descriptions of effective and ineffective feedback, as described in the five main review studies on feedback, and (2) the main concerns of positive psychology. These sensitizing concepts were feedback and emotions, praise, feedback about the self, and progress and discrepancy feedback. Subsequently, we established keywords and search terms. For feedback and emotions, the keywords were positive and negative feedback, emotions, positive emotions and learning. For praise and feedback about the self, the keywords were character strengths, praise, non-specific feedback and self-efficacy. For progress and discrepancy feedback, we used progress feedback, gap feedback, feedback and goals, and goals and learning as keywords. We used a search engine that combined several other search engines including those of primary importance: ERIC, Journal Citation Reports (JCR), Science & Social Edition, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Scopus and Web of Science. From the articles we located based on these keywords, we analyzed the abstract and the conclusion. Articles were selected based on topical relevance for the sensitizing concepts we described above. Consequently, we used the "snowball method" to expand the number of articles forming the basis for our research. We arrived at 26 articles from positive psychology which met the following criteria: (1) the article was cited more than once, and (2) the conclusions found in the article were also found in other articles.

3. Findings

3.1. Emotions, and in particular positive emotions, and feedback

We will explore the relationship between emotions and feedback by discussing (a) the impact of emotions on learning and (b) the impact of feedback on emotions. We will specifically describe the impact of positive emotions.