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Loss management and agency: Undergraduate students' online psychological processing of lower-than-expected assessment feedback

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Keywords

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Abstract

Identifying how students can manage the psychological complexity of receiving assessment feedback is important to gain maximum learning and for teachers to facilitate empowering online learning environments. This study discursively explores how a group of students, learning online, psychologically process assessment feedback. Data comprised 29 posts from a student-initiated asynchronous discussion in a first-year undergraduate online distance psychology course. Posts centre around different ways of managing loss over lower-than-expected assessment feedback involving three repertoires: distress, discord and review; facing the difficulties; and ways forward comprising three resources: acknowledgement and solutions, lessons learnt, and accommodating challenges. The psychological loss arising from the removal of a psychological attachment to a grade aspiration is theorised. Findings show how students' discourse functioned to (legitimately) challenge the teacher's power while also creating constructive solutions, including exercising agency over one's online learning. Teaching strategies for managing the psychology of receiving assessment feedback online are shared.

Introduction

This study aims to understand how a group of students, who are learning online, psychologically experience assessment feedback. Receiving assessment feedback is a complex emotional process, in that "students' emotions greatly influence the way in which they are able to receive and process feedback" (Värlander 2008, p. 146). Dowden, Pittaway, Yost, and McCarthy's (2013) study of first and second-year distance and on-campus students' perceptions of feedback found that "emotions strongly mediated" (p. 349) perceptions, with strong negative emotional reactions eliminating the potential to use assessment feedback constructively. If students can maintain motivation while experiencing negative emotions, this is likely to improve their academic success (Burleson & Picard, 2004; Kort, Reilly, & Picard, 2001).

Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2001) argue that the process of communicating assessment feedback is "problematic because of the particular nature of the power relationship" that exists

between teacher and student, whereby the teacher "occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student" (p. 273). The teacher's ability to bestow judgement simultaneously communicates their expert status and authority. This increases the value attached to the judgement and the subsequent "power of these judgements to invoke feelings…within students" (Higgins et al., 2001, p. 273). Hence, the assessment feedback process integrates power, emotion and discourse, which impact on students' capacity to benefit from the process (Carless, 2006). Identifying ways in which students can manage and navigate the psychological complexity of receiving assessment feedback is important for students to gain the most learning from their assessment (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Yorke, 2003) and for teachers to facilitate empowering learning environments.

Added to this mix of complex factors is online learning, where students are not bound by distance, time and location (Ally, 2008). Using data from a student discussion forum within an online course, this study investigates how a group of students learning online psychologically process assessment outcomes. This study offers a unique discursive lens on emotional reactions to assessment feedback online through loss management. The psychological (or symbolic) loss arising from the removal of a psychological attachment to a grade aspiration or expected assessment outcome is theorised, with findings compared to stage and task-based theories of loss. Findings also show how students' online discourse functioned to (legitimately) challenge the teacher's power while also creating constructive solutions. Some teaching strategies for managing the psychology of receiving assessment feedback online are shared.

Online learning environments, power and emotion

On the one hand, online learning environments may impede students' freedom to provide feedback about their assessment feedback. Drawing upon Foucault (1977, cited in Kitto, 2003), Kitto relates online learning environments to a panopticon, a disciplining power that imposes standards and regulates behaviour. Kitto (2003) explains how surveillance can operate within an online course because everywhere a student goes is traceable. Any posts made by students are also visible to every other student. Hierarchy is embedded within the system with only the lecturer having access rights to each student's movements, participation and performance. In Anderson's (2006, p. 118) analysis of distance students' perceptions of online interactions, participants disliked always being "under surveillance", including the lecturer having access to their small group discussions, viewed by some as private spaces. For others, the lecturer's "authoritative gaze" (Anderson, p. 118) was oppressive and prevented them from voicing their opinion.

Alternatively, online learning environments may have the capacity to facilitate students' viewpoints, including students' ability to challenge the status quo. Peach and Bieber (2015) found that "online education affords participants opportunities to circumvent traditional mechanisms of control" (p. 38). Anderson's (2006) interviews with distance students experienced in employing asynchronous text-based forums identified how everyone has the capacity to give voice to their viewpoint. This was counter to face-to-face classrooms where some individuals overpower others. Anderson (2006, p. 110) argues that in online learning environments, students can actively structure their encounters to suit their intentions and "create their own political space". This may have implications for how students choose to manage their emotional reactions to assessment feedback and students' capacity to fully participate in online learning.

For effective online learning environments, emotion regulation has also been deemed critical (Zu, Du, & Fan, 2014; Tseng & Yeh, 2013). Zembylas' (2008) literature review found that negative emotions experienced while learning online could inhibit the learning process. Zu et al. (2014, p. 803) found that the capacity to manage emotion within online group work incorporated strategies for "down-regulating unpleasant emotions" such as telling others not to dwell on their mistakes, and "up-regulating positive emotions". O'Shea, Stone, and Delahunty (2015) found that the most crucial factor in sustaining online learning was receiving good marks because this represented and affirmed the suitability of students' subject choice and online learning mode. These authors suggest that engaging

online may involve more challenges, compared to face-to-face contexts, arising from the lack of face-to-face interaction and subsequent feelings of isolation and alienation. Subsequently, the nature of online learning environments may have the potential to incur significant emotional challenges. How some students navigate these emotional learning challenges with respect to assessment feedback online is a focus of this article.

Grade expectations and emotional reactions to assessment feedback

Grade expectations can influence how students psychologically react to their course and assessment feedback experience. Remedios, Lieberman, and Benton (2000) measured 242 psychology undergraduates' grades, grade expectations and course enjoyment. They concluded that grade expectations, as opposed to actual grades, influenced students' judgements about their course experience. The authors suggest a fundamental factor in shaping the "emotional reactions to grades" (p. 366) is students' grade aspirations, defined as being hoped-for-grades or grades students felt they deserved.

Some students who experience lower-than-expected outcomes may feel a sense of lost entitlement. In cases of unmet grade aspirations, assessment feedback may represent the gap between how one hopes to perform and immediate performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Higgins et al. (2001, p. 272) assert that "the student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some 'return' on that investment". Research has found that students "expect their hard work to pay off with a high grade" (Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, & Williamson, 2015, p. 342). Nesbit and Burton (2006, p. 657) argue that the effort put into assignments will be highly visible to students, and, subsequently, effort will be central in students' "equity calculations" of their input relative to the reward obtained. Nesbit and Burton (2006) found that students, who received lower marks and where these marks were lower-than expected, were more likely to view the mark and the marking process as unjust. Subsequently, the effort and emotional investment already made in an assignment may lead some students to attach a sense of entitlement or right to an expected result, especially as the work has already been produced, despite the result not yet being awarded.

These intersecting factors, including emotions, grade expectations, the teacher-student power relationship, and the power and emotion dynamics of online learning environments highlight the psychological complexity around students' assessment feedback experience and the importance of understanding how students are managing this experience online. While there is a growing body of literature on emotions, learning and assessment (Best et al., 2015; Cramp, Lamond, Coleyshaw, & Beck, 2012; Crossman, 2007; Dowden et al., 2013; Gilmore & Anderson, 2016; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; Storrs, 2012; Värlander, 2008) few studies appear to base their theorising on data simultaneously initiated by students within an online learning context. The current study aims to discursively explore how a group of students, who were learning online, psychologically processed assessment feedback online, by analysing stage 1 students' discussion posts about their first assessment feedback. Discourse analysis was used because it provides direct access to the construction of people's online experience (Bowker & Tuffin, 2009).

A discursive methodology

A discursive psychological approach (Billig, 2012) comprising discourse analysis was deployed where language is seen as taking an active part in experience. Discourse analysis has developed from semiotics, ethnomethodology and linguistic philosophy (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wittgenstein, 1953; Austin, 1962). What one attends to within an experience is guided by taken-for-granted assumptions and culturally appropriate conventions for constructing accounts, justifications and explanations (Edwards, 2012; Burr, 1995). How one chooses to conceptualise and construct their experience is integrally linked to the linguistic resources available. For example, constructing an event

involving the activity of complaining is inextricably connected to how one comes to conceptualise, interpret, and experience that event (Edwards, 2012).

Language is embedded within a particular social and historical context and meaning is bound within that context (Gergen, 1985). Discourse analysis uses people's textual constructions as the focus, where the primary goal is understanding how discourse functions within a particular context (Tuffin, 2005). For example, people may talk about a situation to lay or allay blame. They may accept, resist or challenge how they are positioned within a socially constructed category. These categories and their associated practices offer subject positions (subjectivities), which people take-up in varying ways in social interaction (Davies & Harré, 1999).

Context of the data

Data comprised posts from an asynchronous discussion thread in a stage 1 undergraduate psychology course at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, an online distance learning institution. The majority of Open Polytechnic students are adult learners, 25 years or over (75%), part-time (93%) including studying while working (68%), and female (59%) (Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, 2013). The course operated via a Moodle page, providing online assessment submission with printed course materials posted to students. Forum participation was optional with each post accessible to everyone, including teaching staff.

The discussion thread consisted of 29 posts exclusively from students, with 83% of posts occurring after institutional opening hours, from 7.50pm Friday to 6.03pm Sunday. The thread was located within a forum called 'Questions (Around the Kitchen Table)', where students posted queries about the assessments and other coursework. The thread was called 'Marking of Lab 1' and focused on feedback for the first assignment, a 20% laboratory report. This was an abbreviated version of a full report, where students could apply their feedback to a more advanced laboratory report. Students were supplied with a detailed marking rubric and an exemplar.

The first post identified feedback about the expression of numbers (e.g., two versus 2), counter to advice previously provided. The student was satisfied with their assignment mark and wished to clarify the inconsistency. The feedback had occurred through the application of a general versus specific rule by one of the markers, although assignment marks were not affected. The error was acknowledged by the course leader and students were reassured that no marks had been deducted.

Ethical process

The author was also the course leader for the trimester in which the forum posts, used for this research, occurred. The course leader had marked approximately 10% of the assignments in the class, with the majority marked by adjunct markers. There was a significant time gap of five years between the official undertaking of this research and the occurrence of the course posts. The nature of this research grew from an exploratory idea about how students manage assessment feedback online, which evolved over a five year period. Ethical approval was gained from the Open Polytechnic's Ethics Committee, with informed consent obtained for the inclusion of students' posts.

The extracted posts presented in this analysis came from 10 students, most of whom were no longer studying at the Open Polytechnic either because they had finished their qualification or had exited. The majority were contacted initially by telephone to introduce the purpose of the research and the inclusion of their forum post(s). If they expressed interest, a follow-up email was sent with a participant information sheet, a consent form outlining their rights as participants, and a copy of their forum post(s). If they agreed, they replied with 'I agree' in the subject line. Of the 10 participants, three were contacted solely by email due to out-of-date telephone details. All 10 participants replied with 'I agree' in the subject line.

Analysis process

Nineteen students had contributed to the 29 posts, with some students contributing more than one post. Posts were read multiple times to look for patterns. A preliminary, yet detailed analysis identified loose themes around negative (and positive) emotions, agreement and disagreement, and conflict. Posts which talked about specific issues in similar ways were grouped together and refined into overarching categories (interpretative repertoires) and their component parts (linguistic resources). Initially, two draft repertoires were identified: unmet expectations and acceptance. Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) concept of an interpretative repertoire emphasises the flexibility in linguistic resources available to speakers (Burr, 1995). Interpretative repertoires are built from linguistic resources or "internally consistent" (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172) regularities in discourse. Linguistic resources are basic building blocks that provide support for the operation of an interpretative repertoire, which functions to summarise explanations available in culture to make sense of everyday interactions (Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

From the 29 posts, 12 were selected because they best illustrate the diverse range of students' assessment feedback experiences. Refinements in analysis narrowed this down to 10 represented in this chronologically numbered sequence of forum posts: 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, 14, 16, 20, and 25, from a total of 29. Each post (or extract from the post) is supported by the analysis, regarded as a form of reading, where many versions are possible. The researcher's partial interpretation is fully acknowledged. Errors remain to ensure data integrity. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality, with other identifying details altered or removed. 'APA' refers to the American Psychological Association referencing and formatting system used in psychology.

Analytic Findings

Posts were organised around different ways of experiencing and managing loss over lower-than-expected assessment outcomes. Three repertoires were identified: 'distress, discord and review'; 'facing the difficulties'; and 'ways forward' comprising three resources: 'acknowledgement and solutions', 'lessons learnt', and 'accommodating challenges'.

Distress, discord and review

When the outcome received falls well short of expectations, students experience distress involving shock and disappointment. This is justified because of the discord arising from incongruence between their expectations versus the marker's actions. The discord, in turn, justifies the review.

In post 2, Abbey constructs an experience of disappointment and shock upon receiving her mark.

> Friday 24 April, 7.59pm
>
> I was actually very disappointed in my grade. I passed, but (by my standards) hardly. I too thought that some of the things I had been marked incorrectly and should have been correct. I also noticed that (because I took G & A psychology last yr 2nd semester) some of the things my tutors have previously told me I should include or not include (which I made sure I did/didn't do for this assignment) were also commented on as being wrong. Also, because I have already learnt to write APA and to write lab reports last year I was expecting a nice high grade for this and was very shocked when I saw what I'd received.
>
> I have contacted the tutors about this and they have said they will look into the topic (getting a remark for my assignment) next week for me. It might be a good idea you do this too? Perhaps if the tutors do spot a problem with my/our reports they will look

into this further? – or maybe we just have the wrong idea… I guess we will find out 😄

Sooo pleased to hear someone else feels the same way though!

Although Abbey meets the pass criteria, the result is well below her standards. Her distress is vindicated by a three-part list, creating representation and completeness for rhetorical effect (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The list comprises marking errors in which the incorrect things 'should have been correct', the discord between previous teaching and current feedback received, and lab report writing knowledge already achieved validating her high grade expectations. These build a logical and factual account, challenging her assessment outcome's validity. Abbey's construction simultaneously objectifies her complaint and minimises her positioning as someone who whinges (Edwards, 2012).

The account focuses on seeking a review, justified by the preceding events. This functions to remove Abbey from being responsible for her mark and unmet expectations, with responsibility directed at the marker and the remarking process. (Abbey applied for a remark, which did not result in a grade change.) Abbey remains open to a different outcome, constructing her and others as having 'the wrong idea', safeguarding her against being proven wrong by the remark. The final statement activates a shared consistency in experience.

In post 4, Jason identifies the discord between the reality of his report and the marker's comments.

Saturday 25 April, 10.08am

Sadly I got a really shocking mark (to be honest I am a little disapointed with the markers comments and don't really feel that my mark reflects the actual content of my report etc … but that is never here nor there) […]

I have asked my tutor about having it re-marked so heres hoping!

A 'really shocking mark' suggests the outcome was grossly unacceptable and clearly distressing. The marker's work (in parentheses) fails to reflect the reality of Jason's report compounding the shock received. Appraisal of the marker's work functions to remove blame from Jason for the mark received and his unmet expectations, repositioning responsibility upon the marker. The discrepancy between the reality of his report and the marker's comments, together with receiving the shocking mark warrant Jason's remark. (Jason did not subsequently apply for a remark.) Simultaneously, while Jason downplays his view of reality with it is neither 'here nor there', opening his appraisal on 'to be honest' terms positions this part of his account within a personalised realm, where honesty strengthens the authenticity and validity of his experience.

Facing the difficulties

This repertoire is about facing the losses arising from the outcome despite the difficulties. This involves confronting one's weaknesses. Although a pathway to improvement is identified, the journey is fraught with difficulties.

In post 3, John constructs the difficulties faced on many levels:

Saturday 25 April, 8.25am

I passed too, but still much less than I wanted. Seemed to have crashed out on the APA formatting for headings etc and the results /graphs. One of the reasons was the lack of comment about the results which I thought would go in the discussion section. Now I know what the tutors want, will go back to the drawing board and into Burton with more depth before submitting next assignment.

Be interesting how I am supposed to fit all the required information into 2000 words though.

The requirements for APA formatting are much harder here, but I guess that it is a Psychology course!

John constructs having 'crashed out', which positions him as being responsible for the mark received and evokes a destructive and tragic sense of loss. Deployment of 'seemed to have' minimises his accountability for the outcome, repositioning it as something occurring without his involvement as owner of the action. A performance weakness is identified, which is challenged by his prior interpretation of events. As a result of the feedback, he now possesses the knowledge needed to satisfy the tutors' criteria. Yet, the tutors' wishes dictate the criteria, rather than Jason alone having this agency.

Significant work is still required; going 'back to the drawing board' means starting back at the beginning and trying a different approach. More difficulties arise with bringing in 'all the required information' and facing the word limit constraints, indicating a struggle between opposing forces which tests the limits of what is realistically achievable. Realisation of standards being 'much harder' to meet is acknowledged. These standards are warranted because of the subject, which also positions responsibility for these standards (and associated difficulties) on the course.

In post 5, Lalitha constructs a rationale for viewing her assignment outcome positively: it is her 'first paper'. Her weaknesses are also framed positively: the feedback received was 'constructive' suggesting a practical application.

Saturday 25 April, 11.54am

As this is my first paper I guess I should be happy with a pass, the constructive comments where I went wrong was good. As usual am always hard on myself but there is definitely room for improvement which I know I can achieve. Hence, why I post for advice/clarification and am frustrated and disheartened when I don't get a response from anyone. However I do understand people have limited time as I am the same but please we are all here to pass and especially those who have been there and done that (have experience/knowledge) in report writing and the course in general PLEASE PLEASE take a few minutes to help those like myself who doesnt find this easy and needs help. This is my only source of getting info, I guess this may be a disadvantage instead of a classroom setting. I have also contacted tutor but have not heard back and I assume (there I go again) that with the holidays/markings she may be back-logged with emails. I also contacted another tutor who has just posted a response…YAY!!!

Lalitha is faced with a weakness that is difficult to overcome: being 'hard' on herself. She is highly critical of her inability to meet a standard above a pass. This standard is a barrier towards positive acceptance. In contrast, she regards a positive reaction as an obligation, evident in 'I should be happy with a pass'. Being 'hard' on herself is a usual practice, adding to the difficulties experienced.

Lalitha's account turns briefly to the outcome of improvement, not only possible but personally achievable. Yet her pathway, including requesting advice from others, is fraught with difficulties. No responses are offered. This is frustrating and disheartening. Lalitha's pleas for help continue and are loosely framed around a three-part list. There is an appeal to passing the course as a collective. Secondly, help is justified according to course experience and assignment writing. Thirdly, Lalitha draws on the scarcity of information access: the forum is her only information source. Lack of tutor response reinforces the scarcity. All of these reasons function to mitigate Lalitha's responsibility for the outcome, repositioning responsibility on external factors.

Ways forward

This repertoire offers a range of strategies to constructively manage the experience of lower-than-expected outcomes. Three resources emerge: 'acknowledgement and solutions', 'lessons learnt', and 'accommodating challenges'.

Acknowledgement and solutions

An important part of moving forward is acknowledging the difficulties faced. Acknowledgement serves to highlight the achievements made and mitigates the burden of unmet expectations. Solutions follow, namely, learning from the feedback and application to the next assessment, and deploying the human fallibility of markers. These solutions are positioned as moving forward by giving hope for a better outcome.

In post 14, Karen identifies with lower-than-expected outcomes experienced by others.

> Saturday 25 April, 6.47pm
>
> If this is first lab report you have ever done then i think we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. I too expected more from myself but also appreciate that they are not easy things to grasp. As long as we take comments on board and endeavour to improve on the 2nd one then thats all we can ask of ourselves.
>
> I too will watch with interest with regard to the APA formatting, even the markers can get things wrong and i am sure that the tutors will be discussing this with an idea to making things as clear as possible for us before long.

Karen counterbalances lower-than-expected outcomes with logical reasons: it is the first encounter with this type of assessment and these 'are not easy' assessments. This mitigates the burden of unmet expectations. For those who might be dwelling on their losses, Karen's account constructs a sense of closure because gains can still be made by applying the feedback to another assessment. There is a conditional expectation that 'as long as' one applies the feedback, by learning from the comments for use in the second assignment (c.f., Duncan's [2007, p. 271] 'feed-forward'), that is 'all' that can be reasonably achieved.

Karen acknowledges that 'even the markers can get things wrong', locating markers' errors within the realm of human fallibility. This removes blame from the students, repositioning it upon the markers. The account ends with optimism and hope for the future where issues will be resolved.

In post 16, Isabella constructs annoyance and misery generated by APA.

> Saturday 25 April, 7.44pm
>
> Congrats to all who passed. APA is a b**ch. I hate it. it is the bain of all my lab reports. No matter how many edits and read throughs I do, I always lose a couple of points on APA. Grrrrrrrr. anyway, like phil said, even tutors/markers make mistakes and some things are also opinion so can change from tutor to tutor. I would be happy to post my marked lab report. I'm also really nosey and want to read everyone elses too hehehe. good luck with the remarking. I hope you all get what you want. Take the comments and make your lab 2 awesome!

APA is an aspect of assessment that is hated. Repeated efforts to ensure all APA requirements are met are futile because of the inevitable loss of marks. Such struggles increase the significance of passing and mitigate the burden of unmet expectations because these struggles are so difficult and appear impossible to overcome. Simultaneously, the struggles help alleviate students' accountability for meeting these requirements.

Isabella's account turns towards the possibility of incorrect judgements by tutors/markers. Isabella absolves students of blame and positions the responsibility on the tutors/markers and simultaneously locates the tutors'/markers' errors within human fallibility. Assessment judgements are also constructed as being open to alteration, depending on the opinion of individual tutors, positioning the judgements away from an absolute outcome toward negotiable outcomes. These points offer some hope for all seeking a remark. The account ends with constructing extreme optimism for the second assignment by applying feedback from the first.

Lessons learnt

This centres on learning gained from others' observations or first-hand experiences regarding assessment remarking. The learning presents a benefit for future use by incorporating alternative interpretations of events.

In post 8, Gordon constructs his observations of others' assessment feedback reactions.

> Saturday 25 April, 1.52pm
>
> cant resist the irony in this. Behaviour when things go our way we tend to think its due to our internal attributes when they dont its due to external attributes. Going to use the perception as part of my discussion lab report 2 which goes a long way to prove part of the hypothesis. Anyway theres always a positive side seeya.

Gordon presents an alternative interpretation of people's reactions toward their feedback, differing from the mainstream. Gordon's observations are aligned with the psychological concept of attributions: explanations people give for why things happen (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Accordingly, 'when things go our way' we assume this is because of our internal attributes. Conversely, when the result is unfavourable to us, the reasons are external. Deployment of 'we' positions Gordon as not being immune from these biases. Gordon's account moves the discussion beyond personalised and emotive reactions to extrapolating broader lessons for future use, namely attributions. This is also a concept that students have information about, as it is central to the second assignment. Like acknowledgement and solutions, Gordon constructs the action of applying what he has learnt (and observed) to the next assignment. Gordon offers a potentially positive interpretation countering the construction of loss over unmet expectations.

In post 11, Phil constructs passing as a noteworthy achievement, legitimising a positive reaction. Phil then offers advice about remarks based on personal experience.

> Saturday 25 April, 4.04pm
>
> Well done to everyone for passing, you should be rightly chuffed. don't be sad.
>
> Please don't take this the wrong way anyone (pleeeese), but my theoretically allowed 2 cents worth is to advise that in my experience there are two sets of markers, ones that are fair, and ones that are {fair+kind}. (about 30% kind in the case of my rubbish lab1 report). Now, everyone makes mistakes including markers, that's why its always fair and right to be able to challenge any exam or test's marking (& I too will be doing so meself in another course), BUT please bear in mind that when challenged to re-mark exams even the {fair+kind} marker will become just {fair}. And that's fair 'nuff, lol. just an opinion. (56 tertiary courses and a lot of rubbish talked, but its all meant kindly).

Phil's argument is based on two categories of markers: 'fair' and 'fair+kind'. When a marker is 'challenged' with a re-mark, kindness is removed from the equation. This loss is constructed as reasonable because the 'challenge' of remarking is counter-balanced by the removal of kindness.

Like *acknowledgement and solutions*, markers can make mistakes. Conversely, Phil's account does not necessarily absolve responsibility from students for unmet expectations. Mistakes are framed

as affecting 'everyone', legitimising the 'right' of a remark. Simultaneously, expecting a mark increase from the remark is counterbalanced by the removal of kindness exercised in the remarking process.

Phil's account carefully negotiates the line between advising and offering advice others may not wish to hear. He opens with an appeal and disclaimer, preparing the reader for an unwelcome or unexpected opinion, which protects Phil from those interpreting his account incorrectly. Phil backs-up his opinion according to his experience based on '56 tertiary courses'. Phil's self-deprecating acknowledgement of kindness contributing 30% to his mark positions his own academic performance as also needing advice.

Accommodating challenges

This acknowledges the challenges that accompany learning, which are positioned as something to be accommodated within the learning journey. This accommodation involves learning from one assessment to the next.

In post 20, Alicia deploys her '2 cents' entitlement to the discussion.

> Saturday 25 April, 9.43pm
>
> Hey everyone, thought I would put my 2 cents in lol!! this is my third lab report and APA is not much easier this time around, especially when your trying to retain all the other info to!! I had problems with my graphs and and am hoping that this time I got at least that right!!! by the way i havent got my assignment back yet, i had an extension as i had urgent surgery 3 weeks ago and i have a 2 year old, so things have been very difficult, this time round with all my setbacks, i'm just hoping I passed!! don't stress the mark too much especially if it is your first lab report. By the next report im sure you will feel like a pro!!

Despite this being her third lab report, Alicia has encountered a range of challenges comprising a three-part list: efforts made to remember 'all the other info' have involved minimal gains in managing APA, problems with graphs, and personal circumstances providing further challenges managed through an extension. In contrast to facing the difficulties, these challenges are not deployed to challenge lower-than-expected outcomes. These challenges are factored into Alicia's expectations, and her end goal is adjusted accordingly. Consequently, these challenges legitimise her 'just hoping i passed' expectation.

Alicia advises against focusing on the mark, and any stress from this. First encounters with lab reports are constructed as another way to judge performance, and thus mitigate the burden of lower-than-expected outcomes. This construction also appears in *acknowledgement and solutions*. Worry over the mark is transformed into fruitful learning for application to the next assignment. There is great optimism that the experience gained will lead to future expertise.

Ann's account (post 25) occurred after the course leader's response (providing a detailed explanation of the marking process and mark allocation), located in a general news forum (restricted to one-way communication from teaching staff) on Monday morning. Ann's post may not have arisen without access to the course leader's post.

> Monday 27 April, 12.05pm
>
> Just wanted to say thank you for the excellent example of a lab report provided in our reading materials. I haven't seen anything as thorough as this before in my studies and found it incredibly helpful. Also I felt the different stages were well set out in the assignment notes and the marking sheet was also a very good guide. Like everyone else, the lab report is a learning curve for me and I appreciated the support given,

particularly in the comments provided during marking. It's great to have that back before we launch into the next Lab report.

The beginning of the account is directed at those teaching. The focus is on praising the quality of the resources provided to support the assignment. This is in contrast to previous posts. Ann then repositions her experience in alignment with 'everyone else'. Her experience is constructed as a 'learning curve', positioning the difficulties faced as belonging to the learning process. Simultaneously, the learning curve is both collective and individual because it is aligned with 'everyone else' and it is also her learning curve. Consequently, Ann is constructing agency over her learning. The final sentence implies progress will occur by applying the first assessment's comments to the next.

Discussion

An obvious limitation of the study is the fact that the student discussion thread arose because of a feedback error by one of the markers. Clearly, if the error had not occurred, this discussion and subsequent analysis involving loss management would not have arisen. Simultaneously, the erroneous event opened an opportunity for interpreting students' experience of assessment feedback online.

The online accounts showed students actively working through their psychological reactions to assessment feedback. When the feedback received fell short of expectations, students experienced distress. This was justified because of discord arising from incongruence between their expectations versus the marker's actions and subsequently justified their assessment feedback review. Contrary to challenging the assessment feedback, other students faced the losses despite the difficulties, including inextricably connected emotional challenges surrounding un-learning and re-learning. Further, other students identified specific strategies for psychologically moving forward. One of these strategies involved acknowledging the difficulties faced, which helped mitigate the burden of unmet assessment expectations, followed by solutions: learning from the feedback and then applying it to the next assessment and deploying the human fallibility of markers. These solutions allowed students to move forward by giving hope for a better outcome. A second strategy centred on others' alternative interpretations of existing students' reactions to their assessment feedback, from which all students could benefit. The third strategy highlighted accommodating learning challenges within one's own learning journey.

Students' online discourse was structured around managing, in different ways, the loss arising from lower-than-expected assessment outcomes. The concept of psychological or symbolic loss (Walsh, 2012, p. 10) involves the loss of "dreams for the future", including "the loss of anticipated…accomplishments" (p. 11). These kinds of losses arise from losing psychological attachments to intangible phenomena, including aspirations, wishes, and goals (Levinson, 1972). Drawing on the work of Wain et al. (2004), Walsh (2012) argues that just as one experiences feelings of anger and sadness from death loss, these reactions can be experienced for symbolic loss. A degree of psychological (or symbolic) loss could, therefore, arise from the removal of a psychological attachment to a grade aspiration or expected assessment outcome.

Students' online psychological reactions organised through the discursive repertoires may reflect similar psychological reactions embedded within theories of loss. Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) stage-based theory of loss begins with shock and denial, followed by anger (which can appear in other stages), bargaining, sadness, and acceptance, with hope persisting throughout. Flexibility is identified regarding the ordering of stages because of individual variation including overlapping and reordered stages (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Corr & Corr, 2013). Within *distress, discord, and review*, which deployed the earlier posts, shock and denial were evident. Denial emerged later through the deployment of markers' mistakes in *acknowledgement and solutions*. Clearly, denial was legitimately based on the feedback error regarding the expression of numbers, although this error did not affect students' marks. Anger was most clearly constructed in post 16 ('APA is a b**ch. I hate it…grrr') and post 3 ('crashed out on the APA'). Bargaining, involving the possibility of arriving at an

agreement, which may alter the immediate outcome (Kübler-Ross, 1969), was constructed in requesting a review. Sadness was reflected through disappointment (*distress, discord and review*) and the tragedy of loss and disheartened feelings (*facing the difficulties*).

Acceptance (the final stage) was most apparent in *ways forward*, which deployed some of the later posts (e.g., 20 and 25 out of 29). This final stage requires accepting the loss as the new, permanent reality (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). It appears most vividly in *lessons learnt* and *accommodating challenges*. *Lessons learnt* redefines the experience of lower-than-expected assessment feedback and seeking a remark as potential learning opportunities. *Accommodating challenges* constructs the lower-than-expected outcome received as a legitimate part of the learning journey.

Consistent with Kübler-Ross (1969), hope persists throughout. Hope for a better outcome where others are responsible for change occurs when requesting an assignment review (*distress, discord and review*), and via the mistakes of markers (*acknowledgement and solutions*). Hope, involving the student as the change agent (*acknowledgement and solutions*, *accommodating challenges*), appears through learning from the feedback and applying it to the next assignment. Hope also features indirectly via the practice of acknowledging the struggles faced (*acknowledgement and solutions*), which justifies the significance of the mark achieved, and positively reframes the outcome irrespective of expectations.

Students' posts also reflected features of a task-based theory of loss (Worden & Winokuer, 2011). The task of acknowledging "the reality of the loss" (Worden & Winokuer, 2011, p. 58) occurred in *facing the difficulties*, which addresses what has been lost: the inability to attain a desirable mark, and the loss of not reaching one's standards. The substantial work required to reach an acceptable standard adds to the scale of the reality and difficulties. The task of processing painful feelings is reflected throughout: distress, shock, and disappointment (*distress, discord and review*); destructive and tragic sense of loss and pleas for help (*facing the difficulties*); and hatred directed at APA (Isabella's account in *acknowledgement and solutions*).

The task of adjusting to the loss involves constructive coping strategies, like "redefining the loss" and generating alternative meanings that create benefits (Worden, 2001, p. 33). This was most apparent in the *ways forward* repertoire: the mark received was repositioned as an achievement (*acknowledgement and solutions*); unmet assessment expectations were accommodated as a legitimate part of the learning journey (*accommodating challenges*); feedback received holds benefits for future assignments (*acknowledgement and solutions*, *accommodating challenges*); and alternative perspectives construct the outcome as one that creates learning opportunities for the next assessment, applications for remarking, and even future life lessons (*lessons learnt*).

The central process underlying the management of loss is 'meaning reconstruction' (Neimeyer 2001,p. 4). Dealing with loss is about a process of relearning hopes, interpretations, understandings, and experiences (Attig, 2001). When students experience lower-than-expected assessment outcomes, they may need to reconstruct their immediate beliefs about themselves (*facing the difficulties*), recalibrate their grade aspirations (*accommodating challenges*), as well as find meaning in the feedback received by applying it to the next assignment.

Boud and Molloy (2013, p. 705) argue that for students to constructively receive assessment feedback, they need to "see themselves as agents of their own change, and develop an identity as a productive learner". This involves exercising ownership over one's learning, including effectively interpreting feedback and judging how to make the best use of it. This was most evident in *ways forward* involving a range of constructive solutions for conceptualising and using assessment feedback. *Accommodating challenges* showed how students took direct ownership over their assessment feedback online, incorporating learning challenges within their online learning journey.

A learner agency approach to feedback requires a "learning milieu" (Boud & Molloy, 2013, p. 708). This incorporates a "climate of cooperation between students" where dialogue is central. Such features were evident through students' online posts, which illustrated problem-based and

collaborative learning, interaction and interdependency, key practices required to promote and maintain online learning communities (Hung, Flom, Manu, & Mahmoud, 2015).

In taking control of their learning, students' posts also mirrored sustainable feedback practices identified by Carless, Salter, Yang, and Lam (2011). The online learning community facilitated dialogue where students reflected on their assessment feedback experience. This led to students self-evaluating their abilities (e.g., *facing the difficulties* and *ways forward*). This, in turn, led to self-directed learning where students' feedback to each other directed the learning environment. Simultaneously, the effect of sharing in the forum and the overall tone of questioning, restraint, and encouragement may have also created a moderating effect on individual responses to assessment feedback. Within Evans' (2013, p. 97) conceptualisation of a 'feedback landscape', learning communities or 'feedback networks' can serve to buffer or mediate feedback. Together, these actions highlight students' operation of self-regulation (Carless et al., 2011; Evans, 2013) occurring at collective and individual levels within their online learning community.

Students' ability to voice their opinions and emotional reactions to assessment feedback online may also illustrate how they were establishing "their own political space" (Anderson, 2006, p. 110). Some of the accounts showed how students were able to resist the marker's decision-making process. This arose legitimately because of an error in the marking feedback. Nevertheless, the asynchronous forum may have allowed students to participate outside of traditional (9am-5pm) teaching hours, circumventing the course leader's "authoritative gaze" (Anderson, 2006, p. 118). The findings may suggest some support for the argument that online learners are "more in control of the rhetorical process" because of the asynchrony, permitting "a more reflective dynamic" (Mersham, 2009, p. 63).

Teaching strategies

Understanding the emotional processes students experience, when encountering lower-than-expected assessment outcomes, have enabled the development of teaching strategies to manage the psychology of receiving assessment feedback online. These revolve around advising students collectively on how to self-regulate their learning upon receiving assessment feedback online. This includes acknowledging students' efforts expended in producing an assignment, yet distinguishing this from the online marking process, which can only base its outcome on the product received. This strategy also makes explicit the objectivity embedded in the online marking process, while simultaneously communicating empathy with the efforts expended.

Empathy is further communicated by acknowledging feelings of disappointment if results do not reflect mark aspirations. Advice is offered on how students can constructively manage the negative affective state of disappointment arising from lower-than-expected assessment outcomes. Distancing themselves from the assignment outcome through time to reflect, followed by moving forward by focusing on how they can improve for the next assignment are psychological strategies identified. The distancing strategy incorporates Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) good feedback practice principle of reflection. Using the feedback for the next assessment applies Duncan's (2007) feeding-forward approach and the "overt behaviour" in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006, p. 202) self-regulated learning model.

Students are also advised to evaluate their performance on the basis of their own individual circumstances, taking into account their other commitments outside of study, reflective of a choice to study online, as well as their previous educational experiences. This is, in contrast, to solely focusing on the grade awarded independent of the student's life-study circumstances and experiences. This provides a buffer for any negative emotions, which may impair online learning because of lower-than-expected assessment outcomes.

Well in advance of students' receipt of assessment feedback, the online assessment feedback process is fully explained to minimise uncertainty and increase transparency (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). This includes providing clarity around the timeframes students can expect for the return of their

work, and identifying and explaining the moderation process (Carless, 2006) to ensure equity and fairness in the online marking process (Nesbit & Burton, 2006). Further, a key criterion for selecting online markers is a tactful communication style, sensitive to the range of student reactions to assessment feedback online.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates how students collectively managed online their own and/or other's emotional trajectories arising from the psychological complexity of receiving lower-than-expected assessment feedback online. For some, this involved processing a degree of psychological loss arising from loss of attachment to a higher grade entitlement. The most effective way of managing lower-than-expected assessment feedback involved adjustment by accommodating the loss within their online learning journey and exercising ownership over one's learning. Effective management also involved repositioning the feedback as something containing benefits for improving the next assignment. The psychological processes students used for working through lower-than-expected assessment outcomes may have application to other learning contexts. Teaching strategies, which integrate advising students on how to self-regulate their online learning upon receiving assessment feedback balanced with communicating moderation processes for improved consistency and online assessment feedback processes, may have application to other digital learning contexts.

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