Feedback Interchange in Small-Group Discussion: An Interpretive Review of the Literature

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Abstract
The concern of this paper is with small-group discussion in university teaching as a site where feedback is typically generated and communicated to humanities and social sciences students on their everyday learning. The theme is explored by means of a wide-ranging review of the salient literature, considered afresh through the lens of feedback, and against the backcloth of an ongoing transformation in how feedback in higher education is understood, investigated and practised. It concludes that, in contrast to feedback on graded students' assessments, feedback in small-group discussion is characteristically embedded in real-time teaching-learning interchanges, verbally expressed, generated by student peers as well as by the tutor and, since it is on open display, offers opportunities for vicarious learning. It is also a crucial milieu in which students can practise and be guided towards discursive verbal fluency in discipline-specific meaning-making. Nonetheless, the feedback potential of learning through discussion is often unrealised, and robust evidence is lacking of its impact on the quality of learning over time.

Keywords
Feedback; small group teaching' discussion. tutorials; seminars.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a gradual but profound sea-change in research and practice concerning feedback to university students on their learning (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Winstone and Carless, 2020). Three main facets of this transformation can be foregrounded, each interrelated (Hounsell, 2021). First, whereas the traditional line of sight has centred on the teacher as creator and provider of feedback, it is now widely accepted that valuable feedback can also be generated through interactions with student peers, within and beyond timetabled classes, with non-university professionals in placements and projects, and even with members of the public in the role of service-users or clients (Sargeant and Watling, 2018; Boud and Molloy, 2013).

Second has been a perspective-shift from the actions of the teacher to students' engagement with and deployment of feedback (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Jonsson and Panadero, 2018), and thus with students' agency and the actionability of feedback (Henderson Ajjawi, Boud and Molloy, 2019; Winstone, Nash, Parker and Rowntree, 2017) In other words, the quality of feedback is most productively evaluated through consideration of when, where and how it can be put to constructive use by students in advancing their learning.

Thirdly, the communication of feedback from source to recipient has come to be recognised as inherently problematic, since the criteria which underpin judgments of quality are embedded in tacit disciplinary norms and discourse conventions which need to be grasped for the meaning of feedback to be apprehended (Hounsell, 1988; Hyland, 2009; Sadler, 2010). What this also means for investigating and enhancing practices in higher education is that feedback has to be approached as a phenomenon transacted in particular settings and grounded in a specific subject or professional orientation (Esterhazy, Fossland and Stalheim 2020; van der Kleij, Adie and Cumming 2019).

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Despite this sea-change, however, it is through its interconnections with assessment that feedback continues to be viewed, whether by teachers, students, or researchers, or in surveys of student satisfaction (see e.g. Office for Students, 2022). Indeed, in many instances, feedback has come to be equated with 'assessment feedback' (see e.g. Price, Handley, O'Donovan, Rust and Millar; Evans and Waring, 2020, Adarkwah, 2021), to the neglect of its role in everyday teaching and learning, whether in large-class, small-group or studio settings. This paper seeks to examine the generation and interchange of feedback to students on the quality of their learning in one such setting, that of small-group discussions, through an analysis and review of salient literature.

Since the traffic of feedback has seldom been in the forefront of the small-group discussion literature, unearthing relevant published material was inherently challenging and took many different forms, spanning a half-century of published studies. Thus, while searches of databases including those of Scopus, ERIC and Taylor & Francis yielded many potentially relevant items, just as productive was following-up cross-references to other salient sources in monographs, edited books as well as journals, as well as checking out subsequent citations by others of significant studies. A further complementary source beyond databases of journal articles was that of publications by scholarly associations such as the Society for Research into Higher Education and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. Throughout, a single inclusion criterion was uppermost: does this source offer substantive insights into the interchange of feedback in small-group discussions in everyday university teaching and learning? The review is thus selective and interpretive, in the sense of broadening understanding of a particular phenomenon (Grant and Booth, 2009) rather than seeking to aggregate research findings on small group discussion more generally. It has aimed to be thorough, but it does not claim to be comprehensive.

The review focuses on the humanities and social sciences, where discussion is a widespread function of small-group university teaching, whether discussion typically takes the form of debating ideas, responding to or critiquing a text or representation, or seeking solutions to a problem or case (Tanguay, 2015). The review does not attempt to include online discussions, where parallels may well be possible in principle, but where in practice sufficient equivalence for present review purposes would be difficult to achieve.

The use of the term 'small group discussion' is deliberate, since small-group teaching sessions go by a number of different names —seminars, tutorials, supervisions and recitations – across and even within universities (see e.g. Tapper and Palfreyman, 2011; Mason and Gayton, 2022) and there is no widely accepted way of consistently referring to them. There is also no generally followed norm for group size, even in the Oxford tutorial (Ashwin, 2005). 'Small', needless to say, is therefore relative rather than absolute, especially as the advent of mass higher education has led to increases in typical class sizes (Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Hounsell, 2007), and no attempt is made here to put a fixed ceiling on group size. Pragmatically, however, a distinction is commonly drawn within universities between 'large-class' teaching sessions (which may involve all of a course cohort) and 'small-group' ones which entail a division into several sub-groups. And in response to growing class sizes it has long been commonplace to use various forms of 'buzz-groups' within each small-group class to optimise active participation and interaction (see for example Collier, 1985; Jaques and Salmon, 2009; Svinicki and McKeachie, 2011) and thus continue to strive for what Abercrombie (1974, p.5) termed a 'network of communication between all members'.

Four broad sets of interrelated goals are typically pursued through small-group discussions (see for example Forster, 1995; Lublin and Sutherland 2009):

a. strengthening students' grasp of the subject matter concerned
b. facilitating students' personal growth and development

c. enhancing students' skills in verbal communication and collaboration
d. fostering the characteristic 'habits of mind' and knowledge practices of the subject area or professional domain

The first two of these goals are long-established ones. The third has come to greater prominence as consequence of a concern with strengthening attributes and skills that would have wider currency in life and work beyond graduation (Dunne, 1999; Barrie, 2007) The fourth has emerged more recently from research and scholarship that has thrown light on the development of university students' ways of thinking and practising in their subject of study that are central to their mastery of it (Hounsell and Hounsell, 2007; McCune and Hounsell, 2005; Horn, 2013; Hounsell, 2021).

Each of these four clusters of goals can potentially benefit from feedback where, as here, it is conceived of as an interaction which boosts the quality of students' learning, whether by enabling students to grasp something which otherwise might have eluded them; facilitating a more secure, deeper or richer grasp of what was being learnt; or accelerating their progress along a developmental trajectory.

Studies of Small-Group Discussion

This section of the review weaves together four strands of research and scholarship in small-group discussion: studies of teachers' perspectives and experiences; research into student perspectives and experiences; teacher orchestration of discussion and meaning-making; and observations and analyses of interaction in small-group discussions in university teaching, i.e. in naturalistic settings (Ajjawi, Boud, Henderson and Molloy, 2019). References are also made to studies in pre-university settings where these are of benefit.

University teachers' perspectives

Over the last half-century, there has been a steady stream of sources of guidance for university teachers on small-group discussion (see e.g. Rudduck, 1978; Svinicki and McKeachie, 2011; McCrorie, 2019; Exley, Dennick and Fisher, 2019). A recurring theme is the foregrounding of a cluster of interlaced skills: questioning, listening, summarising, responding and explaining. In many such sources, nonetheless, these skills are not seen as specifically bound up with the interchange of feedback. Bligh (2000) and Jaques and Salmon (2007) give it some consideration, albeit briefly, but in both instances see feedback as a general feature of communication and guidance rather than as something that is fundamental to small-group discussion and takes distinctive forms within it. Similarly, although a small number of reflections by university teachers on their experiences acknowledge a role for small-group discussion in tutors' feedback-giving (see for example Mash, 2001; Kember and McNaught, 2007), that role is not more searchingly dissected.

A more direct association can however be found elsewhere. Exley et al. (2019, pp. 50-51) observe that communication and feedback skills are crucial to effective small-group teaching in 'engaging and encouraging learner interaction' and 'creating an inclusive environment' where contributions from female and male students are treated equitably. By contrast, Forster (1995) sees an important role for feedback-giving by tutors in deepening students' grasp of specific subject-matter and in underpinning students' demonstration of intellectual skills in the subject area concerned. And for Lublin and Sutherland (2009), tutorials have a valuable socialising role, enabling students to receive immediate feedback from the tutor and other students on ideas, attitudes and values. They can also prompt self-direction by encouraging students to question authority and to use feedback from mistakes to arrive at solutions and answers. They also foreshadow the present paper in urging readers to:

> Be broad in your thinking about what constitutes feedback. It is more than just what is written on assignments and exam papers. Strategies used in class that help students measure their learning and identify gaps for themselves are also forms of feedback
>
> (Lublin and Sutherland, p. 52).

Students' perspectives and experiences

There is also a scant harvest of two empirical studies of small-group discussion from the vantage-points of students, each of which casts a valuable light on feedback interactions. An investigation of students' experiences of the distinctive 'Oxford tutorial' (Ashwin, 2005) identified four qualitatively different conceptions, ranging from tutorials as explanations by the tutor of what the student did not know, to tutorials as an exchange of different views where both tutor and student came to a new understanding of the topic. The former, then, entails a recognition by students of how a tutor's comments and observations can facilitate their understanding, while the latter suggests that discussion and interchange can lead to a reshaping of ideas.

These insights mirror earlier findings of a ground-breaking interview-based study by Anderson (1997) of students' experiences of tutorials. It concluded that effective feedback in the social sciences entailed an interplay between *taking out* an expert's view of a subject to students, in terms that novices were likely to understand, and *drawing in* students' more common-sense understandings towards expert positions, where there is a 'reformulating translation' of what the student says into more formal disciplinary discourse (Anderson and McCune, 2013). There is an interesting parallel to be drawn here with the notion of *revoicing* (O'Connor and Michaels, 1996), in which the teacher recasts or elaborates upon a student's contribution to discussion, and thereby assists the student in 'learning how to externalise reasoning, how to compare views, and how to articulate a position' (p. 71). In school-based studies, revoicing has been linked to deeper conceptual engagement, opening up an opportunity for the student to agree or disagree with how what they had said had been transformed by the teacher (Enyedy and Stevens, 2014).

Orchestration of discussion and disciplinary meaning-making

More broadly, Henning (2005), drawing on O'Connor and Michaels' findings, has highlighted the value of subtle guidance by college teachers:

> Higher-level questions elicit divergent student responses, which are examined, broadened, and reworked, through the skilful use of follow-up questions and carefully crafted responses, such as repetitions, reformulations, elaborations, and recaps (Mercer 2000). Follow-up questions, such as 'What do you mean by that?' or 'Can you support your answer with examples?' help students extend and improve the quality of their responses (Dantonio and Beisenherz, 2001). Repetitions can confirm, emphasize, or question student responses, depending on the tone the teacher takes. A reformulation is a way of restating the student's response to better fit the teacher's purposes: to make it clearer, to introduce more formal language, or to make it more accessible to the rest of the class
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> (Henning, 2005, p.92).

O'Connor and Michaels themselves see what they call 'the orchestration of group discussion' as having larger purposes, since 'it provides a site for aligning students with each other and with the content of the academic work while simultaneously socializing them into particular ways of speaking and thinking' (O'Connor and Michaels, 1996, p. 65).

Anderson too forges a connection between the dialogical role of feedback in higher education and academic socialisation, which he sees as necessarily subject-specific and context-bound (Anderson, 2014; c.f. Northedge, 2003; Northedge and McArthur, 2009). Feedback, he argues, is an important

means by which lecturers assist their students 'to become fluent in the meaning-making practices associated with particular disciplines' (Anderson, 2014, p. 137). Acquiring fluency in such discursive practices, however, is not necessarily a straightforward process of enculturation, since effective teaching calls for 'the creation of transitional spaces and hybrid discourses that allow for "movement and change"' (Anderson and McCune, 2013, p. 292). For Northedge and McArthur (2009), a primary role of the teacher is to 'lend' students the capacity to frame meanings within the specialist discourse of the discipline or profession (p. 263). A valuable contribution is made by feedback in enabling students to 'unpack' these discursive practices as well as to deploy them appropriately.

Teacher and student contributions to small-group discussion

Two early Australasian studies of students' and teachers' interactions in audio-recorded tutorials in arts and social sciences mapped out pathways echoed in later research. Powell's analysis (1974) set out a typology of contributions to discussion, including giving or seeking information, expressing an opinion, clarifying or formulating issues, developing or critiquing an argument, and justifying one's beliefs, interpretations and claims to knowledge. But Powell also found that most of the talking was by tutors, providing information rather than encouraging and supporting students' contributions. Baumgart (1976) however found that although about one-third of total talk was by tutors, student roles were complementary, tutors accounting for structuring and soliciting moves, and students for most responding and reacting moves. Two tutor roles were akin to feedback-giving: the *reflexive judge* frequently corrected and supported students' contributions, while the *probe* avoided supplying answers to problems or issues raised, redirecting these instead to the student group.

Subsequent research has continued to document instances where tutors' discussion inputs predominated (and could thereby constrain opportunities for the interchange of feedback), pointing to possible reasons including students' familiarity with seminar discourse conventions, a lack of confidence or trust, and a reluctance to be seen to challenge one's peers (De Klerk, 1995; Stokoe, Benwell and Attenborough, 2013; Goodman, Murphy and Lindquist D'Andrea, 2014; Engin, 2017). Yet, as in the earlier Australasian studies, there have also been efforts to examine how tutors can orchestrate small-group discussions in ways that not only minimise student discomfort but also constructively engage with their inputs. For Shaw, Carey and Mair (2008), what proved crucial in a study of philosophy classes were 'improvisational skills', where tutors facilitated feedback interactions through a readiness to depart from prepared plans and be responsive to students' contributions, reformulating and building from them. Similarly, in an observational study of tutorials on financial management where students were given active encouragement to participate, Hardman (2016) concluded that productive interchange was dependent on the quality (somewhat limited) of the tutor's interventions:

> The most common follow-up to a student's answer was an acknowledgement of its correctness with an affirmative phrase and repetition of a student's answer. Tutor probes and uptake questions were severely under-utilised and students were rarely asked to share their ideas with other students and to expand and clarify their thinking. When this happened, the line of enquiry was often prematurely curtailed, preventing the chaining of tutor questions and student responses into an extended discourse to promote higher order thinking
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> (Hardman, 2016, p. 73).

Adie, van der Kleij and Cumming (2018), analysing feedback dialogue in secondary schools, have forged an even more direct connection between the quality of students' learning and the nature of the teacher's feedback interventions:

> The core qualitative difference evident among the interactions was how opportunities for student involvement in the conversations were opened up or closed down and how this led to

> different forms of student engagement. When teachers provided feedback in the form of questions that asked students to reason, justify, analyse and evaluate their learning, they were inviting students into a dialogue. Some students then engaged in self-analysis of their responses, and provided feedback to the teacher on strategies that worked best for them
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> (Adie et al., 2018, p. 720).

If feedback to university students is to be truly dialogic, Steen-Utheim and Wittek (2017) have argued, there has to be a fundamental shift away from feedback that is simply transmissive and focused on checking comprehension. They report a case study of a first-year undergraduate course in business, utilising a variety of sources of data including audio recordings of oral feedback dialogues, field notes and classroom observations. Adopting a sociocultural perspective, they distinguished four dimensions of dialogic feedback interactions that facilitated students' learning: emotional and relational support; maintenance of dialogue; opportunities for students to express themselves, and the contribution of others to individual growth. They concluded:

> In our study, the feedback dialogues are teacher-centred but with ample opportunities for students co-authoring and contribution to the development of the dialogue. The teacher managed to establish the four quality dimensions; by encouraging a safe and supportive environment, by giving personal face-to-face feedback, by inviting the students into a dialogue and letting them display their understanding and finally by supporting their individual growth and development
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> (Steen-Utheim and Wittek, 2017, p. 27).

Tutor's facilitation of dialogue and nurturing of higher order-thinking through active student engagement have also been examined in papers by Heron and colleagues. Building on research on classroom talk in schools by Alexander (2008), Heron (2018) approached dialogic interaction in seminars as a purposeful dialogue in which meaning is co-constructed by students and teachers through exploration and debate. In a study of two teacher education seminars with international students, one postgraduate and the other undergraduate, Heron and Palfreyman (2021) found that tutors' questioning strategies played an important role in encouraging and scaffolding higher-order thinking, as were also their invitations to students to build on one another's ideas. Scaffolding was famously characterised by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) as a process 'that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would [otherwise] be beyond his unassisted efforts', and its usage in Heron and Palfreyman's analysis is akin to what has been construed in the present paper as a process of the interchange of feedback. In other words, feedback has an adjuvant effect, enabling or accelerating the advance of learning. And indeed, in the most recent study of seminar interaction by Heron, Medland, Winstone and Pitt (2023), the intertwining of teaching and learning with feedback generation is a much more overt and direct one. The study focuses on 'feedback talk' in small-group discussion as dialogue and as teaching. Feedback talk is explicitly differentiated from the kind of verbal feedback given on an assignment, and instead conceived of 'as part of the contingent, episodic and dialogic interaction between students and teachers'; such interactions 'probe, question and clarify meanings to support learning' and 'take place in moment-by-moment exchanges in the classroom' (Heron et al., 2023, p. 1).

The data for the latter study comprised transcripts of six seminars that fall broadly within the area of the humanities and social studies (Heron et al. 2023). The coding framework that emerges from their analysis of the seminar transcripts differentiates ten indices of feedback talk, grouped into three clusters ***confirmation and validation***; ***information giving***; and ***questioning***. While at first glance these constructs find echoes in many of the earlier studies already reviewed, they take on special importance here by serving to heighten substantive distinctions between traditional written feedback on assignments and verbal feedback interchange in small-group discussion. Thus, three items in the

first coding cluster (*validating, praising* and *affirming)* and two in the second *(correcting and negating*) are just as readily found in written feedback comments (Hounsell, 2015). By contrast, five other sub-categories represent verbal, in-the-moment comments that, as it were, maintain the momentum of an ongoing feedback dialogue, creating the opportunity to carry it forward beyond the initial interchange. _Thus, in cluster two, *consolidating* entails 'playing back a student's response', while *elaborating* builds on a student's contribution to the discussion, for instance by offering an example. Similarly, in cluster three, *requesting clarification* is a check that a comment has been properly understood, *probing* seeks further details, and *initiating* is an invitation to other students in the discussion group to add their voices to the evolving conversation. There is a direct parallel to be drawn here with what Hardman (2016, p.73) captured in the phrase 'the chaining of tutor questions and student responses into an extended discourse to promote higher order thinking', and with what Basturkmen (2003, p. 31) has highlighted in analysing seminar interactions as a mutual responsiveness with chains of interactive moves'.

Heron and colleagues see wider implications of their findings for the circumscribed way in which feedback has traditionally been perceived:

> The codes demonstrate that feedback involves so much more than correcting, negating, retrospection and providing direction for improvement. The framework taken as a whole shows the range of follow up moves such as elaborating and asking for justification which would not typically be considered feedback, and yet are a central part of the dialogue and the processes of teaching and learning and evident in the classroom talk
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> (Heron et al., 2023, p. 10).

Conclusions and Implications

To recapitulate, our aim in this paper has not been to undertake a comprehensive review of small-group discussion, but rather to examine the salient literature afresh through the lens of the generation of feedback to students on their learning. And although the concern has been with higher education, and within it the broad field of the humanities and social sciences, the review has also drawn more widely on fruitful insights and perspectives. This closing section aims to synthesises the distinguishing features of feedback in this specific setting and reflect on implications for research and practice.

The traffic of feedback in small-group discussion

Across the span of studies reviewed, seminar and tutorial teaching has emerged as fertile terrain for the interchange of 'in-the-moment' feedback. Where this was effective, it could come about in forms that echoed written feedback of the more traditional kind— for example through praise, correction, question-raising, validation, or suggestions for further study (Hounsell, 2015). But a distinctive feature of feedback interchange in discussion is that it need not entail separation or dislocation between expression and response of the kind that has, in recent years, fuelled student dissatisfaction with the delays and lack of actionability experienced with conventional feedback provision (Hounsell , McCune, Hounsell and Litjens, 2008, Henderson et al. 2019). What might be called 'learning-in-action' in small-group discussions (whether in the form of the articulation of understandings, the scrutiny of evidence, or the deployment of reasoning and discursive skills) can be checked at first hand and adjusted, refined, deepened or extended immediately, and in open view of all present. The feedback generated has in consequence greater potential to be sustainable (Hounsell, 2007) and productive (Esterhazy, 2019).

The productivity of feedback can also be enhanced through the interactive dialogue (Chi and Wylie, 2014) which small group discussion facilitates. Feedback does not need to be simply monologically reactive (as in a traditional written comment on assessed work) but can set in train an extended chain of dialogue as students' thoughts and ideas are progressively moulded, added to, reshaped, weighed

against evidence, or challenged. With careful scaffolding (Shute, 2008) by the tutor, a student can be enabled to reformulate or 'revoice' a contribution in more disciplinarily appropriate terms, while other students could be drawn into the ongoing exchanges, making inputs of their own or proposing alternative perspectives. The consequent generation of rich, intrinsic feedback (Laurillard, 2003, Hounsell, 2007) could enable students there and then to strengthen their grasp of disciplinary ways of thinking and communicating, whether embodied by the tutor, or by their fellow-students, or directly practised by themselves in their contributions to the evolving discussion and their responses to other students' contributions.

It also seems reasonable to conclude that, since the interchange of feedback in the setting of small-group discussion is visible in real time to all the participating students (rather than being privately and individually transacted through the medium of written comments), there is ample scope for what has been termed vicarious learning (Chi, Kang and Yaghmourian, 2017; Geertshuis, Liu, Rix, Murdoch and McConnell, 2021) or feedback by proxy (Hounsell, 2007; Esterhazy, Fossland and Stalheim, 2020). In other words, feedback gains can accrue across the student-group from witnessing – but not necessarily contributing personally to – an exchange between, say, the tutor and one of their fellow-participants in the discussion, or between two or more student peers.

Implications for practices

As this review has indicated, the feedback enacted in small-group discussion does not simply add to the provision of feedback on students' assessed work but is powerfully complementary, giving rise to distinctive verbal feedback opportunities that are in-the-moment, embedded in the ongoing discourse, initiated by students as well as by tutors, and experienced vicariously as well as at first hand. Yet these benefits cannot be taken-for-granted, for there was also cumulative evidence of a gap – mirrored in small-group learning in schools (Howe, 2021) – between aspiration and actuality, whether because the tutor's voice predominated, or because there was an absence of active, responsive listening to students, or a failure to capitalise on 'moments of contingency' (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson and Wiliam, 2005) where interactions could be extended and built upon, forging a lattice of interactive moves.

The compelling implication is thus that much more attention needs to be given in universities to articulating, promulgating and strengthening teachers' capabilities in the complexities of interactional feedback talk (Heron et al., 2023; van der Kleij and Adie, 2020; Walsh, 2016; Cosgrove, 2011). This could perhaps valuably include strategies in building student confidence and trust when making contributions to discussion, and in clarifying tutorial ground-rules. Given that feedback practices are intertwined with discipline-specific and institutional standards, conventions and implicit rules (Esterhazy, 2019), professional development activities would be unlikely to succeed without a localised component, ideally underpinned by videorecorded extracts from day-to-day practices and tactful collaborative mentoring (Hardman, 2021).

Nor should enhancing feedback literacy in discussion be confined to teachers and curriculum leaders. As Lawrence Stenhouse concluded a half-century ago, ‘developing satisfactory small group work depends as much on student training as on teacher training’. (Stenhouse, 1972, p. 19; Walsh 2016). There are gains to be had in greater awareness of the value of active listening where students as well as teachers can ‘use their emergent understandings to steer the feedback dialogue for maximum learning benefit’ (Adie et al., 2018, p. 707). De Kleijn (2023) sets out a helpful framework of prompts that can guide students' active participation as well as tutors' facilitation.

Implications for research

Lastly, the evidence base on feedback in small-group discussion is sorely in need not just of expansion

(to take in a much wider range of subject, institutional and cultural settings) but also of strengthening. Exploratory research already cited by Hardman, Adie, Engin, Steen-Utheim and Wittek, and by Heron and colleagues offers analytical tools and frameworks that can helpfully guide future investigations of this particular manifestation of 'feedback in situ' (Ajjawi and Boud, 2017), which should include peer-to-peer interactions as well as those between teacher and student peers. But further empirical enquiry is also essential to identify ways of probing learning outcomes more systematically, while ensuring that students' experiences and perceptions of feedback in small group discussion are directly captured, and over more than the timespan of a single course unit or module.

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