

Technology-Supported Peer Feedback in Higher Education: An Interactive Experience of Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

Many online learning environments have been designed and developed to support peer feedback processes. Writing of Master's thesis is a complex process, which requires several stages to produce a good writing product which encompasses a clear claim supported by argumentation, reasoning and evidence, acknowledgement of counter-arguments against the original claim, and integrations of the arguments and counter-arguments which could lead to a final conclusion on the issue. The aim of this study was to investigate the nature of online peer feedback and the extent of incorporating peer revisions on postgraduate students' writing in the Master's programme. This study constructed online peer feedback based on the Zone of Proximal Development Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory (Collins, 1991) which emphasise that peer interaction is significant to writing development and constructing knowledge through social sharing and communication, which involves six cumulative processes for externalizing knowledge. Qualitative approach was employed to identify the patterns of online peer feedback. The primary data was collected through participant-generated thesis and focus group interview among six Master's students between the ages of 22 to 35 registered in the Department of Language Education in the School of Education at a rural university in South Africa. The results of the study showed that the participants were able to produce feedback that addressed varied writing features focusing on content (idea development and organization) and language (vocabulary and style, structure and mechanics). The study offered a number of pedagogical implications for the implementation of online peer feedback in postgraduate programmes.

Keywords: Online peer feedback, cognitive apprenticeship theory, collaborative eLearning environment, self-reflection, peer support, Master's thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide resulting in widespread closure of schools, colleges and universities as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In response to the COVID-19 situation, South Africa announced state of emergency on the 27th of March, 2020 (Motlhaka, 2021). During the nationwide lockdown, all South Africans were not allowed to leave their homes except under strict controlled circumstances which included the seeking of medical care, buying food, medicine and other supplies or the collection of social grants. COVID-19 resulted in the suspension of academic activities except for

online courses. This situation resulted in distance e-learning as a new method of teaching to maintain the continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance e-learning has proven to be an efficient modality of learning processes in exceptional and emergency situations such as COVID-19 pandemic (Balas et al., 2020; Ihm et al., 2021; Motlhaka, 2021). Therefore, various platforms and applications had been implemented in distance learning including ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, YouTube channels, Moodle, Blackboard-based instruction and Skype in South African higher education because of its easiness and accessibility (Motlhaka, 2020). Consequently, online learning

environments have been designed and developed to support peer feedback processes to stimulate learning through interaction, exchange of knowledge and ideas, risk taking, and construction of meaning (Lin, Liu, & Yuan, 2018; Noroozi et al., 2016; Ahmed & Al-kadi, 2021).

The pandemic has led to changes in the format of the supervision, as meetings moved primarily online. Postgraduate students often report experiencing a sense of isolation during their training even in normal times, which is likely exacerbated during COVID-19. Several studies indicate that postgraduate students face difficulties in finishing their dissertations due to dealing with the task on their own, generally performed in isolation and without didactic support among others (Beach, 2002; Lundell; Beach, 2002; Delyser, 2003; Gardner, 2007; Lovitts, 2008; Lee; Murray, 2013; Simpson *et al.*, 2016; Peng, 2018). Considering above-mentioned difficulties experienced by postgraduate students, several studies have shown that feedback from peers and supervisors can contribute to different aspects of the dissertation process from experiential and epistemological to specifically textual dimensions (Dressler *et al.*, 2019; Yu, 2019). Peer feedback has received increasing attention from academic writing instructors and thesis supervisors in most recent years. Online peer feedback is one of the promising educational strategies to improve student's argumentative essay writing and learning. For example, researchers have shown that peer feedback can improve students' writing quality (Huisman, Saab, van Driel, & van den Broek, 2018; Noroozi & Hatami, 2019; Noroozi et al., 2016; Valero Haro, Noroozi, Biemans & Mulder, 2019b), students' feedback quality (Gielen & De Wever, 2015; Noroozi et al., 2016), domain-specific knowledge gain (Valero Haro et al., 2019b) and students' attitudes towards the subject at hand (Noroozi & Mulder, 2017). Although these studies have confirmed the effectiveness of online peer feedback, there are some main criticisms on the

way in which peer feedback is implemented. For example, there are concerns about the quality of peer feedback because of students' limited knowledge, experience and language ability (Noroozi et al., 2018; Saito & Fujita, 2004). Also, there are emotional and psychological issues with giving and receiving critical feedback (Andriessen, 2006). These challenges suggest that implication of peer feedback in classrooms needs to be supported to fully guarantee its effectiveness (Noroozi et al., 2016).

Peer feedback on academic writing of postgraduate students raises awareness of the thesis/dissertation genre, improves academic writing skills, becomes a more skilful learner by seeking external assistance, and a more reflective and critical academic writer (Yu, 2019). In other words, peer feedback makes academic writers to become reflective and critical hence it is regarded as a formative developmental process that gives writers the opportunity to discuss and discover other interpretations of their texts. Several studies revealed positive impact of peer feedback on revision processes in writing and on the development of students' writing skills (Berg 1999; Jacobs et al. 1998; Min 2006; Paulus 1999; Tsui and Ng 2000). For instance, *Álvarez, Colombo and Difabio (2021)* examine in-text feedback and overall feedback on dissertation chapter drafts as well as students' opinion about giving and receiving feedback, both before and after taking part in the peer revision activities proposed in an online dissertation writing workshop. They found that peer feedback allowed students to objectify the text or even delve into a critical evaluation of their own dissertation work which led to an improvement of the text at different levels. DeLyser (2003) found that peer comments on dissertation chapters can help students overcome their fear to share their drafts and contribute to development of a critical eye when following certain guidelines. In addition, Maher et al. (2008) showed that students who participated in a dissertation-writing group recognized two

essential contributions of peer exchange. In other words, students could start feeling they are part of a scientific and discursive community and the textual production within the framework of the conventional structure of academic writing, mainly of the dissertation because students no longer understand writing as an activity performed in the private environment, but as a collective work (Álvarez, Colombo & Difabio, 2021). Thus, peer feedback is considered a viable means of teaching in Institutions of Higher Education which experience a continuous increase and diversification of the student population and a decrease in individualised supervision/tuition. Despite extensive amount of literature on peer feedback, most of the studies were limited to face-to-face learning environment. There is also a scarcity of studies examining dissertation writers' experience and perception of online peer feedback, hence this study aims to investigate the nature of online peer feedback and the extent of incorporating peer revisions on postgraduate students' writing in the Masters' programme. Therefore, this study seeks to analyse the impact of online peer feedback on postgraduate students' dissertations and their viewpoints about giving and receiving feedback before and after a virtual postgraduate supervision workshop.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study constructed online peer feedback based on the Zone of Proximal Development Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory (Collins, 1991) which emphasise that peer interaction is significant to writing development and constructing knowledge through social sharing and communication, which involves six cumulative processes for externalizing knowledge (Motlhaka, 2021; Lam & Habil, 2020). This suggests that online peer feedback enables collaborative learning based on explicit criteria set by lecturers and exposes students to a greater diversity of perspectives than just those of their tutor or lecturer which provides more effective comments to develop subsequent drafts (Pham, 2019; Ho, Ly & Thien, 2020). In other

words, peer feedback fosters the improvement of writing in terms of content, organization, and grammar/structure. Several studies have also investigated the impact of peer feedback on the quality of revision. For example, Pham and Usaha (2016), Pham (2019) and Pham et al. (2020) found that peer feedback positively affects students' writing performance. Berg (1999) and Pham and Usaha (2016) also found that students' writing quality improved significantly in terms of the mean score and the length of the essays after receiving peer feedback. The use of Zone of Proximal Development Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory (Collins, 1991) showed that peer interaction mediated by technologies fosters awareness on different aspects of thesis writing, which makes it possible to perform a metalinguistic reflection that would not be possible if working in isolation. This reflection encompasses not only global and macro-textual dimensions but also micro-textual aspects, including the acknowledgement of linguistic strategies and resources. This case study of five Master's students shows that peer feedback increased awareness of the dissertation as an academic genre, enhanced academic writing skills, improved learning abilities based on seeking external assistance, and raised reflective and critical thinking as academic writers. Focus of peer feedback included four categories: content, formal requirements, coherence and cohesion, and linguistic accuracy/appropriateness. Therefore, this study contributes to this growing body of research on postgraduate writing by analyzing both online peer feedback as well as students' perspectives on revision activities before and after their participation on a workshop.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The research was conducted on a postgraduate online collaborative supervision through Google Drive offered by the researcher as a supervisor of five Master's students between the ages of 25 to 55 registered in the Department of Language Education in the School of Education at a rural university in South Africa and it was organized in three stages. During the

first stage, students participated in two online discussion forums. They introduced themselves in Forum 1 and reflected on the writing process and giving and receiving feedback in Forum 2. In the latter, they were asked if they usually gave or received feedback, from and to whom, and if they had ever had a negative experience in this regard. At the end of this week, students were given a document with the conceptualizations about writing and feedback (including different feedback types and ways of offering it).

During the second stage, students were paired based on similarities of challenges of writing a thesis. They were asked to revise their own chapters and their partner's chapters following three models of dissertation writing: 1) communicative interaction and situation model, which is concerned with the social relationships and the communicative roles of participants in an interaction and its context; 2) event model, which reflects the research process, the content and the extra-linguistic reality that the thesis refers to, and 3) textual model, which is related to the specific features of the writing in relation to certain discursive tradition, the various dimensions of linguistic communication, and its variants. In this regard, the researcher established the general structure of dissertations and the moves and steps adopted in each of its sections. Rhetorical moves are made of steps and a move can consist of a single step or a combination of them.

Based on these models, the three weeks of the second stage were organized as follows: Week 1: students revised the chapters considering the communicative interaction and situation model as well as the event model. Week 2: revisions were based on the textual model, specifically in the identification of moves and steps in the chapters. Week 3: students analyzed the chapters based on the textual model but this time paying special attention to the language strategies and resources used in the draft. To fulfil the revision activities proposed in this second phase, it was created for each student 1) a shared document in Google Drive to upload the thesis chapter and 2) a discussion forum where revision activities were discussed with peers and

supervisor. These two applications supported the required tasks. The in-text feedback refers to all of the marginal comments added that can be considered as spontaneous thoughts, expressing the dialogue established between reader and writer. Global feedback takes the form of a message in which readers summarize their main appreciations about the text and its sections. Global feedback was shared in the discussion forum. Finally, in the third stage (two weeks), each student rewrote her/his own chapter considering the feedback received. Similarly to what they did in the peer revision, they produced in-text and overall feedback for their own drafts. During this period, interaction with their thesis supervisor took place via email. In this and the previous phases, documents were shared with students in the virtual platform. At the end of the workshop, focus group interview was conducted to determine students' perspectives on revision activities before and after their participation on a workshop.

PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Numerous studies have examined why Masters students experience difficulties in completing their degrees across disciplines. These challenges may be of a personal nature, including stress (Barry et al., 2018), gender-related issues (Carter et al., 2013; Erichsen et al., 2014), feeling like an imposter (Fernandez et al., 2019), and managing the identity transformation process (Koole & Stack, 2016). There are also academic and institution-based challenges, such as funding (Fernandez et al., 2019), the academic environment (McAlpine, 2017), and managing relationships between the advisor and the advisee (Owens et al., 2020). For Masters students, the process of designing, implementing, and writing a culminating research project (typically called a dissertation or thesis) is a key part of the learning experience. These research projects typically require students to direct their own learning and to manage setbacks, obstacles, and challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Masters students around the globe had to undertake this key learning experience in the context of a global crisis. Starting in early 2020, measures required

to curb the spread of the virus—such as campus closures, lockdowns, and required quarantine periods—suddenly changed Masters students' lives. Considering above-mentioned difficulties experienced by Masters students, several studies have shown that feedback from peers and supervisors can contribute to different aspects of the thesis process from experiential and epistemological to specifically textual dimensions (Dressler *et al.*, 2019; Yu, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to analyse the impact of online peer feedback on Masters students' theses and their viewpoints about giving and receiving feedback before and after online postgraduate supervision workshop as a new method of supervision to maintain the continuity of supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study will provide a scientific database for making decisions regarding online peer feedback as a new method of supervision to maintain the continuity of supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Education Institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used qualitative research to understand the perceptions of Masters students about the use of online peer feedback to maintain the continuity of supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Education Institutions through focus group interviews. The research was conducted on a postgraduate online collaborative supervision through Google Drive offered by the researcher as a supervisor of five Master's students between the ages of 25 to 55 registered in the Department of Language Education in the School of Education at a rural university in South Africa and it was organized in three stages. As a requirement to enrol, students were asked to have at least a complete first draft of their theses to ensure that they were advanced in their thesis writing process and that they would have a draft to review as part of the workshop activities. I created a peer assessment forum to offer Masters students a structured opportunity to review their work and the work of fellow students and help them to develop their

own academic writing style and critical thinking skills. Each student receives anonymous feedback which helps them to develop their writing, whilst encouraging them to look critically at the quality of their own reviews.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study seeks to answer the following two main questions:

- What are Masters students' perceptions about the use of online peer feedback through online postgraduate supervision workshop to maintain the continuity of supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Education Institutions?
- What are the effects of online feedback on Masters students' theses?

SAMPLING

The research population of this study included five Masters students between the ages of 25 to 55 registered in the Department of Language Education, School of Education at a rural university in South Africa for Master of Education (Language Education in English).

DATA COLLECTION

The primary data for the study came from participant-generated thesis and focus group interviews.

Masters thesis

Respondents wrote their thesis in English on different individual research topics of their choice approved by the Departmental Research Committee. It was therefore mandatory for students to submit thesis draft, provide peer feedback and to submit a final draft of their theses within the pre-set deadlines. I created a peer assessment forum to offer Masters students a structured opportunity to review their work and the work of fellow students and help them to develop their own academic writing style and critical thinking skills. The peer feedback was conducted on a postgraduate online collaborative supervision workshop through Google Drive offered by the researcher as a supervisor of five Masters students between the ages of 25 to 55 registered in the Department

of Language Education in the School of Education at a rural university in South Africa and it was organized in three stages. Focus of peer feedback included four categories: content, formal requirements, coherence and cohesion, and linguistic accuracy/appropriateness with special reference to the background and motivation of the study, problem statement, literature review, interpretation and analysis of data because these are areas that students were having challenges with when writing their theses. To fulfil the revision activities proposed in this second phase, it was created for each student 1) a shared document in Google Drive to upload the thesis chapter and 2) a discussion forum where revision activities were discussed with peers and supervisor. These two applications supported the required tasks. Finally, in the third stage (two weeks), each student rewrote her/his own chapter considering the feedback received. Similarly, to what they did in the peer revision, they produced in-text and overall feedback for their own drafts. During this period, interaction with their supervisor took place via email. In this and the previous phases, documents were shared with students in Google Drive. Each student receives anonymous feedback which helps them to develop their writing, whilst encouraging them to look critically at the quality of their own reviews. At the end of the workshop, focus group interview was conducted to determine students' perspectives on revision activities before and after their participation on a workshop.

Focus group interview

The second data collection technique used in this study was focus group interview to explore the experiences of respondents in giving and receiving peer feedback and incorporating it in their final draft as way of improving their writing skills. During the focus group interview, respondents and the researcher reflected on the academic structure of their thesis, with specific focus on the background and motivation of the study, research problem, literature review, research methodology, theoretical framework, interpretation and analysis of data because these are areas that students were having challenges

with when writing their theses. This study draws from multiple voices and a socially oriented research procedure which put control of the interaction and construction of knowledge in the hands of respondents rather than the researcher (Motlhaka & Makalela, 2016). The interview session lasted for 60 minutes.

Data analysis

Grounded theory method was used to analyse data after the transcription of the interview. Grounded theory method is a scientific method that uses a set of systematic procedures of data collection and analysis to generate, elaborate and validate substantive theories which emphasis learning from the data rather than from an existing theoretical view. According to Strauss and Corbin, grounded theory is based on the idea of coding to analyse the data. The coding process can be divided into three: open, axial and selective coding. Open coding involves breaking, analysing, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing the collected data to give sense to it. The analysis of data was guided by the following research questions:

- What are Masters students' perceptions about the use of online peer feedback through online postgraduate supervision workshop to maintain the continuity of supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic in Higher Education Institutions?
- What are the effects of online feedback on Masters students' theses?

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study aimed to investigate the impact of online peer feedback on postgraduate students' dissertations and their viewpoints about giving and receiving feedback before and after a virtual postgraduate supervision workshop. The following themes emerged and discussed during the analysis of data.

Background and motivation of the study

Background and motivation of the study introduces the broad area of research leading up to the topic and briefly summarizes previous research to accentuate progress in the field in order to identify gaps in knowledge that remain unaddressed. The background has to provide the

context of the study. Respondents said the following in their own words to justify the importance of having a good background and motivation of the study in chapter one of their thesis as they reflected on their final draft after receiving peer feedback and reading through their cohorts' thesis:

Excerpt 2

Online collaborative postgraduate supervision workshop provided me with opportunities for different perspectives to understand the importance of writing background and motivation of the study in chapter one of my thesis by indicating what current literature says about the research area, what are some of the gaps in existing studies, and how this led to the gap I intend to examine in my study.

Excerpt 4

Peer feedback provided me with opportunities for different perspectives on how to situate my study within a brief overview of key literature around the identified problem with concrete examples of what works and what doesn't in similar types of writing which encourage me to think of my peers' writing style to improve my writing abilities.

Above responses indicate that peer feedback has the potential to facilitate students' academic thesis writing and supplement the supervision process despite supervisor feedback is regarded as the main source of supervision which provides access to the academic conventions of a postgraduate student discourse community. The findings of this study are supported by theories from different disciplines, including collaborative learning theory, process writing theory, interaction theory in second language acquisition and sociocultural theory which provide benefits that can be shared by students, regardless of whether they are feedback receivers or providers (Yu, 2019). In the context of this study, peer feedback provides a supportive socio-interactive environment in which students receive and provide social supports and peer scaffolding, mutual learning that takes place within a recursive and socially constructive process in which meaning-making

and knowledge transformation are realised with opportunities for different perspectives in writing the background and motivation of the study in their theses. This finding concurs with the findings of studies by Nicol, Thomson and Breslin (2014) and Motlhaka (2021) which stated that reviewing peer's essays and research proposal enabled them to learn new ideas and different perspectives, become more aware of their own writing weaknesses and develop their own writing skills.

Research problem

A problem statement briefly describes the identified research problem and briefly captures the reasons why the problem has to be investigated.

Excerpt 3

Peer feedback enhanced my writing processes in reflection and critical thinking in identifying the research problem and proposing how to address it which is something I was struggling with before collaborative supervision session. I really learned from peers on how to write a comprehensive as well as concise research problem that illustrates the current research situation on the relevant topic without any redundant words.

Excerpt 5

Peer feedback helped me to critically analyze my own writing process of a research problem and my peers' thesis in harnessing my writing features and behaviours.

The findings of this study show that peer feedback enhanced students' writing processes in reflection and critical thinking in identifying the research problem and to how to write in harnessing their writing features and behaviours. The findings also foster self-directed learning skills, promote deeper learning which encourage open-minded, reflective, critical and active learning by from peers on how to write a comprehensive as well as concise research problem that illustrates the current research situation on the relevant topic without any redundant words. In other words, peer feedback allowed Masters students with different abilities and knowledge on thesis writing to promote their higher order thinking and reflective thinking

through mutual observation and comments and have the opportunity to revise their writings prior to submitting their final drafts. This helps students to understand common writing and content errors in writing research problem in their theses. The subsequent theme deals with the respondents' experience of peer feedback in revising their literature review chapter.

Literature review

The literature review is a crucial and analytical overview of studies apt to the research topic wherein the researcher should demonstrate sufficient knowledge about recent and relevant research to justify the envisaged study. The following views were expressed by respondents regarding the impact of peer feedback in enhancing their understanding and writing skills of literature review chapter:

Excerpt 6

Peer feedback was really helpful in rewriting information from another source in my own words, without changing the meaning as a way of improving my grammatical accuracy and linguistic knowledge of academic genres by looking at how my peers structured their literature review. By doing this, I will attempt to identify arguments that guide me to most effectively organise the literature review.

Excerpt 7

Using reporting verbs and linking words in streamlining literature to align with my research objectives – to ensure relevance and relatedness was a nightmare but peer feedback and reading through my peers' thesis helped me put together a number of findings which support my research topic and contrast them with those which do not support it. I was overwhelmed by having to review the large body of literature relevant to my research project, but reading and responding to my peers' theses helped me to learn how to create a clear and logical literature review.

The findings show that peer feedback was helpful to students in rewriting information from another source in their own words, without changing the meaning as a way of improving their grammatical accuracy and linguistic knowledge of academic genres by looking at how their peers structured their literature review.

The findings of this study suggest that students were able to identify relationship between ideas and practices, establishing the context of the topic or problem, rationalizing the significance of the problem, enhancing and acquiring the subject vocabulary, understand the structure of the subject, relating ideas and theory to applications that have been used to show familiarity with literature. Thus, peer feedback helped students to consolidate what is already known about a subject and to enable them to identify any knowledge gaps and how their research could contribute to further understanding and shape their thinking. The next theme addresses the respondents' interpretation and analysis of data after receiving peer feedback.

Interpretation and analysis of data

To complete the dissertation properly, it is necessary for researchers to analyse the data collected in order to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions so that an informed decision can be made based on them. There are four steps to data interpretation: 1) assemble the information needed, 2) develop findings, 3) develop conclusions, and 4) develop recommendations. To corroborate this point, two respondents allude to it as follows based on the impact of peer feedback:

Excerpt 8

I think collaborative supervision enhanced my understanding that data could be interpreted and analysed by grouping ideas and evidence in a logical way by determining which findings are most relevant or important and making meaning clearer to readers because I can have access to peers' theses and see how they have interpreted and analysed their data. For example, when presenting the findings, researchers need to illustrate the identified categories with examples and direct quotations from the transcripts.

Excerpt 9

Online peer feedback discussion on interpretation and analysis of data shows that I should examine each component of the data in order to draw conclusions and explain what these findings mean in the given context, something I was not aware of prior to online

collaborative supervision. For example, I learn how to present empirical evidence to support my qualitative research findings.

Above responses suggest that respondents were struggling to interpret and analyse data before collaborative supervision and attest that they have benefited from online peer feedback discussion which eventually raised their awareness of interpreting and analysing data by grouping ideas and evidence in a logical way and determining which findings are most relevant in answering the research questions. The findings suggest that peer feedback helped Masters students to analyse and interpret collected data by determining the conclusions, significance, and implications of the findings supported by empirical evidence.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of online peer feedback on postgraduate students' theses and their viewpoints about giving and receiving feedback before and after a virtual postgraduate supervision workshop. This study reports on how Master's degree students learned and benefited from providing feedback on their peers' academic theses to contribute to peer feedback research in thesis/dissertation academic writing contexts. The study found that peer feedback provides a supportive socio-interactive environment in which Masters students receive and provide social support and peer scaffolding, mutual learning that takes place within a recursive and socially constructive process in which meaning-making and knowledge transformation are realised with opportunities from different perspectives. The findings also foster self-directed learning skills, promote deeper learning which encourage open-minded, reflective, critical and active learning from peers on how to write a comprehensive as well as concise thesis that illustrates the current research situation on the relevant topic without any redundant words. This study found that feedback-giving activities in academic thesis writing generated insights into the nature of peer interactions in academic writing. Finally, it provided practical implications for Master's

degree education programmes and thesis supervisors on how to maximise the potential of peer feedback to enhance Master's degree students' academic writing.

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