Title: **Relationship between Student Feedback and Participation in University Teacher Development Programs**
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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Student feedback is an important source for evaluating and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2009). Most studies on feedback focus on the analysis and evaluation of the validity of feedback questionnaires (Benton & Cashin, 2012; Huxham, Laybourn, Cairnmcross, Gray, Brown, Goldfinch, & Earl, 2008; Richardson, 2005) and how student feedback alligns with preferred student learning and teaching approaches (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Diseth, 2007).

However, in the context of improving learning and teaching quality it is necessary to pay attention to how student feedback is related to university teacher development. The relationship between student feedback and university teacher development programs has been viewed from various perspectives, for example, how participation in university teacher development progams influences student feedback (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007); and, what changes university teachers make in their teaching as a result of student feedback (Arthur, 2009; Moore & Kuol, 2005). One important factor that has not received much attention is the university teacher's perception of student feedback validity and credibility. If we are to look at student feedback as a source of information that supports the development of the teaching quality, then it is necessary to study how teachers interpret the trustworhiness of student feedback.

Student feedback can both motivate and discourage teachers to enhance their teaching. While positive feedback usually encourages teaching improvement efforts, it has been shown that negative feedback can have a demotivating influence leading to minimal interest to change (Arthur, 2009; Moore & Kuol, 2005). How the teacher receives and interprets student feeback seems to be a critical factor in its impact on teaching improvement efforts. Arthur (2009) indicates a tendency for teachers to associate positive student feedback to the teacher's personality (for example, developing a relationship with students); while those linked to negative feedback were interpreted as having more to do with students (their expectations, the nature of the group and the level of challenge). The ability of university teachers to reflect on their teaching has been identified as an important factor in interpreting and using student feedback and it has been shown that student feedback is perceived more positively by teachers who employ regular reflection (Winchester & Winchester, 2013).

Participation in teacher development programs influences teacher's interest and ability to modify their practice to adopt more student centered teaching approaches (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff et al., 2007), as well as their abllity to understand and manage different and also difficult teaching/learning situations (Cilliers & Herman, 2010).Training programs develop teacher reflective skills that support continuous professional development (Marsh & Roche, 1997). However, the impact of such programs upon teachers' ability to interpret and utilize student feedback has not been well investigated. The current study explores university teachers' responses, reactions and interpretrations of student feedback. We are interested in

shedding additional light on how participation in university teacher development programs influences teacher interpretation of and response to student feedback.

Method

At the University of Tartu, student feedback has been electronically collected since 2006 and completion of an end of term multiple-choice test type student feedback on teaching questionnaire has been obligatory for every student for every subject. The questionnaire has been modified a few times since 2011: the number of questions has been reduced and changed and additional fields for free answers have been added. Also, students have been provided freedom to choose what subjects they will provide feedback on, with a minimum of four subjects required.

Teacher attitude towards student feedback has been mixed and there have been continuous and frequent discussions of the use and value of student feedback. The current research is part of a larger qualtiative study aimed at getting data to analyze the usefulness of changes in the feedback system and prevailing university teacher attitudes towards the student feedback system.

This qualitative study, conducted at the University of Tartu during the 2012/2013 academic year interviewed 42 university teachers, some of whom participated in university teacher training programs and others who did not. The research questions for the current study were: How do university teachers react to and interpret student feedback?; How does participation in university teacher training programs influence the attitude of teachers towards student feedback and their interpretation of such feedback?

Findings

Preliminary results indicate differences in the interpretation of student feedback between those university teachers who participated in university teacher development programs and those who did not. Differences were found in the following areas of teacher attitudes and behaviors:

1. **Managing emotions.** The partcipation in teacher training programs influences the ability to manage emotions concerning student feedback. Non-trained teachers expressed stress, anxiety and frustration as their first reaction even before reading student feedback. Trained teachers responded less stressfuly.
2. **Understanding feedback.** Non-trained teachers expressed more confusion in reading feedback. They indicated greater lack of understanding of the reasons for the feedback that they recieved.
3. **Ability to reflect on the feedback.** Non-trained teachers were less likely to see feedback as stemming from their actions and more likely to indicate that feedback is the result of the arrangement of the curricula, course characteristics, or student characteristics. In general, they expressed the tendency to see the reason for problems described in student feedback as related to factors outside of their own behavior, attitudes and control. Trained teachers expressed greater acceptance of their impact on student reactions and readiness to analyse their teaching according to received feedback.
4. **Disturbance/frustration that follows negative feedback.** We have found that teachers who have participated in training programs express less defensive feelings to negative student feedback. Non-trained university teachers more often expressed

feelings of guilt and shame after receiving student feedback and usually did not discuss their feedback with others.

5. **Believing the value of feedback.** Non-trained teachers described the tendency to not take negative feedback seriously or to reject it outright, expressing that such feedback is not valuable for them. Teachers who have participated in training programs were more interested in student feedback and indicated greater willingness to develop their teaching by incorporating feedback results.

6. **Attitude towards students as feedback giver.** Trained teachers were more postitive about students as feedback givers than those university teachers who have not participated in training programs. The latter's reactions were more negative and accusative towards students and they doubted students' ability to give useful feedback.

Discussion

Participation in university teacher development programs helps academics manage their emotions, because in such programs they have learned how feedback works and what factors influence the interpretation of feedback. Training helps university teachers improve their skills in interpreting and understanding student feedback as well as providing foundational knowledge about the teaching/learning processes, and why students like and don't like some instructional activities (Cilliers & Herman, 2010).

Training programs have helped to improve the ablity and readiness of university teachers to reflect on student feedback. In such courses teachers have been provided opportunities for reflection. Additionally, peer feedback given participants during such traing increases the opportunity to analysize one's own teaching and value the feedback as an important source of information for teaching enhancement. As studies have pointed out, the ability to reflect is central for one's development as a teacher (Marsh & Roche, 1997; Winchester & Winchester, 2013). Participation in teacher development courses also helps reduce the stress of getting negative feedback, for often in trainings participants have witnessed other academics with similar negative feedback and teaching problems; reminding them that they are not the only "non-perfect" teachers. Feelings of guilt are decreased by the collegiality developed with other participants in these courses which also increases feelings of teacher self-confidence. Additional studies have shown that the feedback is more useful for improving the teaching quality when there is support provided for interpreting student feedback (Penny & Coe, 2004).

In conclusion, we can say that receiving and interpreting student feedback is often a complicated and stressful task. Receiving, interpreting and using feedback to enhance teaching is difficult to do successfully without preparation and support. Such preparation and support is usually provided by university teacher development programs. Participation in university teacher development programs supports the increase of self-confidence and collegiality between academics, understanding of what students value in teaching approaches and in the development of teacher's ability to reflect on and utilize student feedback.

Practical implications

The development of programs to prepare university teachers should include opportunities to develop the ability to reflect on feedback from students and peers. Such reflective opportunities depend on an understanding of the reliability and validity of student ratings of teaching, which should also be an integral part of teacher training programs. Additionally, it is important for trainers and academic developers to understand and counter teacher tendency to discount and discredit student feedback, especially those who have not participated in teacher

training program. Trainers often get frustrated when faced with such resistance and it is important not to "buy in" to such responses. With training, university teachers can be led to understand the usefulness of student feedback and trainers should support integration of reflection on feedback as a central component of such training programs.

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