Feedback on student performance in the workplace: The role of workplace supervisors

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This chapter highlights the importance of feedback in work-integrated learning (WIL), the key role of workplace supervisors, and the importance of continuous improvement in systems to support feedback processes. The paper proposes a definition of feedback and formative feedback, as well as approaches for providing industry feedback in WIL. It further reports on a case analysis based on workplace supervisors providing feedback to students in engineering and urban development, yielding certain insights into student performance in the workplace, and more importantly, highlighting the need to enhance the use of feedback processes. This is required in a context where delivering feedback in WIL is generally acknowledged to be complex, and where the role of the industry supervisor in appraising the performance of the student in the workplace needs to be very clearly defined in order for supervisors' feedback to have optimal impact. Feedback in WIL is set against the backdrop of recognizing the importance and complexity of stakeholder engagement in WIL in general, and the intricacy associated with the provision of feedback from industry supervisors in particular. Student self-assessment is briefly considered as a further dimension of their participation in providing feedback on their own performance in the workplace. *(Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2014, 15(3), 241-252)*

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Feedback in the work-integrated learning (WIL) placement context is considered by many to be precarious (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Hodges, Smith & Jones, 2004). It is recognized that the work experience component of WIL has the potential to reinforce the professional learning achieved in traditional university environments as well as promoting the development of generic skill learning. That is, WIL provides graduates with the relevant skill sets to ensure professional development in experiential learning environments. The complexity of feedback on performance derives partially from the need to somehow integrate the dual perspectives of the workplace supervisor and the academic mentor upon the student's performance, and in so doing, acknowledge and even celebrate the differences in which learning occurs in the workplace and the classroom. These are contrasting to the extent that the workplace is often a chaotic and unpredictable environment whereas the classroom is, ideally, able to be more controlled (Raelin, 2008). More than this, the feedback of students on their own performance needs to be incorporated into the mix in what is effectively a tripartite arrangement. This three-part relationship will be shown as crucial to the successful provision of workplace feedback to students in the WIL context.

Feedback in WIL is acknowledged to be frequently developed and conducted in a hurried fashion and sometimes comprising an approach that merely reproduces academic assessment in the workplace context (Hodges, Smith, & Jones 2004). Often the act of providing feedback – at least in a written format – can be seen as an act of compliance rather than a genuine commitment to further learning and reflection (i.e., where meeting university

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monitoring requirements is the motivator). It is contended here that for assessment to be effective in WIL, and for students to be able to access a depth of learning in the workplace through maximizing the full impact of industry feedback, it is necessary to frame and implement a model of industry feedback that effectively incorporates the clearly defined perspectives of the student, the industry mentor and the academic. There is a particular need for clarity around the role of the industry supervisor who fills the roles variously of manager, educator, mentor, administrator, and coach vis-à-vis the student. This paper will consider three possible approaches to integrating industry feedback with student and academic perspectives, as well as the aspect of maximizing student agency to benefit from the available feedback to a high degree. It will also deal with the major challenges to workplace supervisors in the provision of feedback to WIL students, proposing approaches to these issues.

DEFINITION OF FEEDBACK

A social science definition of feedback from 1943 holds that: "… feedback [signifies] that the behavior of an object is controlled by the margin of error at which the object stands at a given time with reference to a relatively specific goal." (Van de Ridder et al., 2008, p. 190). This definition presents feedback as a cycle connecting input and output but over time, the cycle concept has expanded and feedback has come to include the meanings of 'information' and 'reaction' in the social sciences. The term 'feedback' is now used and interpreted in diverse ways though tends to be utilized in social science literature as signifying information alone.

Feedback is, in simple terms, information about a student's development. If then, discipline-related work experience provides students with opportunities to hone a range of technical and generic skills and abilities including graduate capabilities such as communication and interpersonal skills; problem solving; critical thinking; and team work skills, it is the industry supervisor's feedback that communicates to students whether they are up to the mark with workplace skills. Although placement experiences are highly variable and influenced by the socio-cultural context of the workplace, quality feedback, whether formative or summative, is crucial to the further development of these desired skills and abilities (Cooper, Orrell, Bowden, 2010). It must be acknowledged, however, that this process will be influenced and impacted by the culture of the discipline and their existing use of feedback for work placements as well as contextual issues such as whether the placement is paid or unpaid.

Meaningful feedback nonetheless provides students with an understanding of how they can close the gap between current and expected performance and helps them trouble-shoot their own performance (Boud, 2000; Hughes, 2013; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Taras, 2005). Students benefit from feedback when they understand the required standard; how their existing performance compares to this standard and; what they need to do to achieve a higher standard (Bloom, Hasting & Maudas, 1971; Hughes, 2013; Sadler, 1989). That is, quality feedback informs students about how well they are performing from a perspective outside themselves (Alverno College Faculty, 1994). This process enables students to critique and further develop their skills and abilities, is deemed indispensable for improvements in thinking and learning, and it also facilitates transition to the workplace.

The quality of the feedback given, however, tends to be influenced by the way in which the requirements are set. An associated problem to do with collecting feedback from supervisors relates is the possibility to collect feedback that is meaningful for students and that is clear, relevant, descriptive and supportable (Richardson et al., 2009). It is argued that for the feedback to be relevant and meaningful to students, it is vital that students participate in the discussions establishing what form the feedback will take and how and when the feedback will be articulated. The quality of feedback given is also a function of the supervisor's skill and tact in the delivery of feedback, in addition to how well defined the feedback conditions are. General issues confronting workplace supervisors have been collated here and applied to an existing feedback process in a mandatory, student-negotiated work placement program in the disciplines of engineering and built environment. Suggested approaches to address these issues are subsequently discussed.

ISSUES FOR THE WORKPLACE SUPERVISOR IN PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Workplace supervisors have the expertise and experience within the workplace and are ideally placed to observe a student's overall performance (Cohen, Farrant & Taibjee, 2009; McNamara, 2008). Moreover, most students highly value the opportunity to be observed and receive feedback from an expert in their field. However, some workplace supervisors may be reluctant to take on the responsibility of providing feedback on student performance in the workplace. This reluctance, sometimes echoed by students and academic staff, may be due to a number of different concerns including:

1. *Quality assurance and promoting supervisor confidence in delivering feedback.*
   The varied types of workplaces and activities that are encountered by students complicate consistency in the provision of feedback across the student cohort. Students can undertake a large array of activities in a wide range of interstate and international workplaces so it can be difficult to ensure a common understanding by workplace supervisors of what is required in terms of giving feedback. More specifically, the supervisor's ability to make assessment judgment about the student's performance in every instance is not possible since they "may not have the specialized skill" (McNamara, 2008, p. 3) needed for the task "and it is questionable whether it is possible to ensure each supervisor has a consistent perception about what they are assessing and what standards are expected" (McNamara, 2008, p. 3). There are also issues of ensuring that the feedback adds value and enhances the teaching opportunities afforded while in the workplace.

2. *Implications for the student/supervisor relationship.*
   When a supervisor works closely with a student, there can be concerns about providing negative feedback in case of a student's particular sensitivities.

3. *Clarification of the multiple roles of workplace supervisors.*
   For the workplace supervisor, the role of teacher/mentor may create confusion when they are called upon to give feedback on a student's performance. Students

may also feel reluctant to share their weaknesses and failings with their supervisor for fear of reprisal and impact on academic outcomes.

4. *Time and resource constraints.*
   Workplaces are typically busy - leaving little time for formal or informal feedback processes especially when supervisors have to oversee the work of a large number of staff and WIL students.

5. *Consequences of feedback.*
   Students may not appreciate negative feedback provided by the workplace supervisor and may respond directly to the workplace supervisor in a negative way. Perhaps even in extreme circumstances, they may choose to take legal action against the supervisor as a way of stating their objections (Chur- Hansen & McLean, 2006; McNamara, 2008).

Identifying the concerns of workplace supervisors as well as offering suggestions for addressing these provides a guide for either introducing this process to a placement program or reviewing an existing program to identify strengths as well as areas for improvement. Below is a case example of a WIL program that currently incorporates workplace supervisors' formative feedback processes as a part of a strategy for improving student performance. Some of the ways in which these feedback processes might be ameliorated will be discussed, accompanied by suggestions to address the five issues challenging supervisors identified.

CASE EXAMPLE OF EXISTING WIL PROGRAM FEEDBACK

There are gaps in the current process of formative feedback adopted in a mandatory, student-negotiated form of work placement in engineering and urban development. In this instance workplace supervisors are asked to verify the completion of work experience and provide formative feedback. This approach is intended to help alleviate pressures and constraints on the supervisor-student relationship, to allow for open interactions, and to reveal strengths and weaknesses of student performance in the workplace. Students and workplace supervisors are expected to agree on learning goals, standards, and behavior expectations using tools provided (e.g., learning contracts or work placement plans, the University Student Code of Conduct, the University Placement Agreement, and position descriptions). This case is investigated below, with an overview of the context; and suggestions for improvements to the feedback process (including emphasis upon student self-assessment).

Workplace Supervisors' Feedback Process

WIL in this context the placement is mandatory and often paid. Depending on the sub-discipline students are required to complete from 30 to 90 days of discipline-relevant work experience. The onus is on students to locate a work placement and to negotiate its terms with minimal university intervention. Students are able to use relevant, existing part-time (or full-time) work towards this requirement. Students facing difficulties in finding a work

placement are offered limited assistance with this issue the focus of continuous improvement efforts. Most students commence a placement from second or third year, and undertake a 12 credit point WIL unit in the final year (approximately 800 students per year), others who are employed on an ongoing basis may elect to undertake a WIL minor (Peach, Gomez, & Ruinard, 2013).

It is a requirement that students submit evidence signed by the workplace supervisor of the number of days worked and type of work activity undertaken. The tool (known as the CTW or Certificate of Time Worked form) is used across the disciplines and sub disciplines in engineering and urban development. It includes a 5-point Likert scale for workplace supervisors to provide formative feedback on student performance against criteria based on the university's graduate outcomes including: professional work habits; communication skills; problem solving skills; team work skills; professional skills; and technical skills and competencies. In addition to the Likert scale the CTW also provides the opportunity for the supervisor to include comments. The CTW explains to workplace supervisors that this formative feedback will not be used for final grading of the student. Students are required to attach a hard copy of the CTW to their final assessment and to submit a scanned copy for university records.

Measures

The way in which this feedback process has been designed both deters and assists the participation of employers in the feedback process. Out of the five concerns that face supervisors in providing feedback this process addresses all but 'quality assurance and promoting employer confidence in delivering feedback' and 'implications for the supervisor/student relationship'. To address these gaps in the current process, improvements could be made to the ways workplace supervisors and students engage in the feedback process including the format and structure of the CTW 5-point scale; timeliness of feedback; use of work plans; and student self-assessment. Wyatt and Meyers (1987) note that participants tend to use 5-point scales more broadly if options are not termed as absolutes. By using the 5-point scale more broadly it might help workplace supervisors to provide both positive and negative feedback. Notably, an analysis of the feedback reveals that it is for the most part positive and the amending of the 5-point scale as proposed might assist in producing more nuanced feedback. In addition, it is possible that some of the issues raised earlier about the provision of supervisor feedback are at play here, that is, lack of supervisor confidence in delivering (negative) feedback, concern for the supervisor/student relationship, time and resource constraints, etc.

Another consideration is that the feedback via the CTW is received at the conclusion of a work placement and whilst it addresses the overall performance of the student additional feedback opportunities should be provided throughout a placement. The timeliness of feedback is critical. Yorke (2003, p. 116) claims that: "no feedback at all, or belated feedback ... cannot be expected to advance student learning". He emphasizes that formative feedback has the advantage over summative feedback of being dialogic and potentially richer in terms of theorizing. Although designed for convenience of use in a very large cohort and to

constitute evidence of the placement completed, the current recording of workplace supervisor feedback on the CTW form is limited. It is often not delivered as part of a broader conversation between workplace supervisor and student and limits opportunities for the student to ask questions to ascertain and clarify meaning in relation to the feedback. It would be beneficial if students were prompted to seek feedback earlier on and where feasible, if guidance from the university was given to supervisors about positive ways to encode constructive messages and to students about the psychology of receiving feedback (Yorke, 2001). Similarly, enhanced use of the work placement plan would give students a chance early in the placement to address areas suggested for improvement and help to identify goals and standards that they are expected to achieve. It would also inform work supervisors about other learning points where students may need support to recognize 'the next steps in learning and how to take them, both during production and in relation to the next assignment' (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 13). It is suggested that providing workplace supervisors with models of positive delivery of feedback might encourage more detailed formative feedback (Peach, Larkin, & Ruinard, 2012).

Closely allied to the provision of formative feedback from workplace supervisors is the role of student self-assessment. An analysis of the function and benefits of such self-assessment is beyond the scope of this chapter, however, it is worth considering the complementary role of obtaining enhanced versions of student self-assessment that include student self-monitoring and self-regulation in the CTW process (Sadler, 1998). Encouraging students to self-assess promotes their ability to: understand both learning intentions and success criteria; use these criteria to judge what they have learnt and what they still need to learn; reflect on the learning process to ascertain how they learn best; act on feedback received from their employer, teacher or peers; set learning targets based on what they still need to learn; and manage the organization of their learning (Sadler, 1998). Through self-assessment students can develop the skills to competently measure and evaluate their own performance as they make progress towards achieving their workplace objectives. In this way they can close the gap between their current level and the benchmarked level, as they become familiar with professional standards and progress to improved professional skills, abilities, and aptitudes (Sadler, 1989).

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES: BROAD APPROACHES TO THE ISSUE OF PROVIDING MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK

One approach, used in disciplines such as health and education, is based on establishing (competency-based) criteria for supervisor feedback. Together key stakeholders determine students' top ranked competencies during placement and formulate these into a template for supervisors to rank student performance part way through and at the end of the placement (Zegwaard et al., 2003, in Richardson et al., 2009). Other approaches to formulating criteria are possible depending on the context. Another approach sees all stakeholders negotiating WIL goals and formulating a learning plan, with early student involvement in setting goals aiming to secure their ownership and commitment. The learning plan constitutes a form of skills portfolio or clearly articulated vision of a career trajectory for the student and the

student might additionally incorporate some personal goals and aspirations into the plan (Jones et al., 2009, in Richardson et al., 2009).

Mant (1997) brings these approaches together in a *Plan-Do-Review* cycle. That is, in the plan phase, a learning plan is developed. The industry supervisor encourages student to move from an academic to a work-based environment, aiming for greater self-sufficiency than typically experienced at university. The WIL experience is planned comprehensively to render the student transition to work as seamless as possible. Students engage in intensive preparation via pre-placement activities to secure a good understanding of the employment role, also devising a position description. In the do phase, the student develops many skills from immersion in the workplace although everyday work activities do not always produce the need to adapt or transfer workplace learning to other circumstances (Billett, 2002). Much of the knowledge required of professionals is also tacit and is, therefore, somewhat intangible. Feedback is delivered through structures such as training, shadowing, mentoring, coaching, and direct and indirect guidance. The review phase reviews the actual learning goals achieved in the workplace against the original, agreed learning outcomes. Industry supervisors aim to employ processes enabling student reflection upon feedback, advice about how to interact in feedback sessions, and how to integrate feedback into action learning cycles. Students need to be well-versed on employer expectations and to reflect openly on their employer feedback. (Mant, 1997, cited in Richardson et al., 2013).

DEVELOPING SKILLS IN PROVIDING POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Beyond these three approaches, the following section of the paper suggests strategies for addressing issues with workplace supervisors providing feedback as referred to previously.

Quality Assurance and Promoting Employer Confidence in Delivering Feedback

There has been considerable debate about whether workplace supervisor feedback should be included as a part of formal results (Richardson et al., 2009). In fields such as health and education, there is a long history of recognizing workplace supervisor feedback as a part of summative assessment. In fact, some studies have shown that students have expressed disappointment if their workplace supervisor's feedback does not contribute to summative assessment (McNamara, 2008). However, if the workplace supervisor's feedback were to be included as a part of formalized assessment the concerns of both the supervisors and the educational institution, particularly regarding quality and consistency, would need to be addressed.

Training is one method that could be considered to address these concerns. The provision of short training sessions to outline the shared goals and purpose of the feedback prior to the placement may help to ensure some level of consistency and quality between workplaces (Richardson et al., 2009). Access to training sessions may be increased through the use of technology such as webinars or training videos for time-poor employers. Alternatively, a concise list of "hints and tips" as well as a clearly designed and descriptive feedback format could provide convenient support for the workplace supervisor without the prescribed

demand on their time (Jones et al., 2009). Simple guides that outline key principles of quality feedback, such as those provided by Nicol and Macfarlane (2006, p. 205) outlined below, can also help to support workplace supervisors in this feedback process:

- Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
- Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
- Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
- Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
- Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; and
- Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

In addition to training, simplifying the feedback process could also aid in ensuring quality and promoting employer confidence in delivering feedback. By refining the supervisor feedback contribution to pass/fail options it removes any requirement for grading. This can help to alleviate concerns of supervisors about providing summative feedback. Woolf & Yorke (2010) argue that other than pass/fail, workplace supervisors were often reluctant to grade students. Knight and Yorke (2003) argue that it is questionable that anything beyond a pass/fail judgment can capture trustworthy summative assessment in the workplace. If there is concern about the influence of the supervisors' feedback on the student's academic outcome the weighting of their contribution also could be limited so that the impact on the student's overall grade is limited.

Implications for the Supervisor/Student Relationship

Providing feedback is an important part of the learning process on work placement (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Richardson et al., 2009). However, delivering negative feedback can be difficult for the supervisor and can create bad feeling if not handled appropriately (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Prince, Boshuizen, van der Vleuten, & Scherpbier, 2005; van der Hem-Stokroos, Daelmans, van de Vleuten, Haarman, & Scherpbier, 2004). Before students receive feedback it is important that they are familiarized with the process and also experience a trusting environment (Chur-Hansen & McLean, 2006). It is essential that student and the workplace supervisor work together to establish shared goals and desired outcomes that arise from the work placement experience. When providing negative feedback it is recommended to use a positive-negative-positive approach, that is, comment on a strength then identify a specific problem and finish with a "motivating or positively enhancing statement" (Chur-Hansen & McLean, 2006, p. 69). It has also been shown that "negative feedback is least likely to evoke negative reactions among recipients when it is perceived as considerate in tone, timely in its delivery, and constructive in its goals – that is, when it is perceived as stemming from a genuine desire to help recipients improve (Geddes & Baron, 1997). In addition to this, providing an opportunity for students to respond to the feedback also aids in minimizing the negative feeling that can arise in these situations (Geddes & Baron, 1997). The aforementioned training processes as well as an effectively designed feedback tool may also supplement the process of maintaining positive interactions between supervisor and

students. This can help to frame the negative feedback in a way that students can use the information to improve their performance without the damaging the relationship.

Clarifying Multiple Supervisor Roles

Finding the balance between the various roles required of the workplace supervisor can be difficult. Supervisor training and student preparation can help to support the supervisors shifting between the roles of assessor and mentor. Alternatively, supervisors could relinquish the role of assessor. Formative feedback allows the workplace supervisor to maintain the role of teacher/mentor without the pressure of having to formally assess the student, allaying role confusion. According to Cooper, Orrell, and Bowden, (2010), the essential elements of formative feedback on workplace performance include: clearly stated learning goals and behavior expectations; learning environments that value and reward the acknowledgement of individual limitations and failures; identification of performance indicators as responsible proxies for demonstrating learning achievements; opportunity to practice difficult skills and procedures with feedback; an expectation that students will use formative feedback to improve performance. In this way formative feedback gives students the freedom to acknowledge their personal strengths and weaknesses and the opportunity to take advantage of a feedback cycle without the pressure of this impacting their relationship or their overall results (Daelmans et al., 2006; Wilkinson & Ward, 2007).

Time and Resource Constraints

As has been noted in various studies (Patrick, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008; Peach, Larkin, & Ruinard, 2012), workplace supervisors often note they are time-poor which leaves little or no time to engage with university processes and paperwork. Quality feedback requires an investment of time for both supervisor and student. It should be provided periodically to allow students an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and close the gap between current and desired performance (Garber, 2008; Nicol & MacFarlane 2006). Workplace supervisors also frequently have a large number of staff and WIL students to oversee. There is little that can be done to actually create more time for the workplace supervisor, however, there are a number of minor administrative and communication processes that can be applied to simplify and refine how the feedback is delivered to make it less demanding on the supervisor's time.

A feedback tool that is clear and concise, and has been pilot tested, can help to encourage supervisors to respond (Myhill, 2006). Response rates can also be increased by providing various methods by which they can be completed (e.g., web-based, paper-based) (Myhill, 2006). There are also other less formal methods for encouraging feedback from supervisors such as supporting student agency. Studies in organizational psychology have suggested that often individuals are not passively waiting for feedback but are actively seeking it (Ashford, 1986; Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013; Dornan, 2012). Students should be encouraged to assume responsibility for eliciting supervisor feedback. There have also been several studies that indicate that feedback seeking has a positive effect on job performance and facilitates adaptability and learning (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013). To minimize the

demand on the workplace supervisors' time the feedback process could also be supplemented with other forms of feedback such as student self-assessment.

Consequences of Feedback

Litigation can be a serious consequence for a workplace supervisor when providing feedback to a student. It is important to establish up front, and in collaboration with the student, the expectations and desired outcomes for the work placement (Chur-Hansen & McLean, 2006). Learning contracts are one method for outlining expected standards and providing documentation to support and guide students through their placement (Bourner & Ellerker, 1993). The university can also help to circumvent a litigious situation by helping students prepare for positive and negative feedback, as well as the steps to take if they feel they have received unfair treatment.

CONCLUSION

In general terms, as has been so frequently observed about WIL, skillful stakeholder engagement is crucial. The university needs to construct its relationship with industry conscientiously and with care, and similarly, they should prepare the workplace supervisors well for the WIL experience. There is a need for even better communication between the academic institution and industry, and for improved liaison between both organizations and the student. Communication should occur prior to and during the placement, where all three parties should participate at certain stages of the placement (Richardson, 2009). Ideally, communication should also occur after the placement in the form of evaluation and learning what can be improved in the future. This investigation has identified approaches to key issues facing supervisors providing feedback to students and suggested that these be communicated to supervisors.

Workplace experiences afford students exposure to future workplaces and opportunities to explore how they are positioned in terms of graduate knowledge, skills, and proficiencies (Billett, 2001). Workplace supervisor feedback on performance on the job is a critical aspect of this learning process enabling students to recognize areas of strength and those needing improvement. Clear direction and quality feedback can help reduce student uncertainty about their performance in the workplace and encourage increased effort (Shute, 2008). As has been illustrated, the roles played by supervisors are various, not all supervisors are confident in the feedback role and it can be difficult to identify performance indicators and measure performance in 'ill-defined' work situations (Bates, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2003). This critique of feedback provided by workplace supervisors has identified key issues and areas for improvement. By adjusting aspects of feedback tools and processes in ways such as, using less absolute terminology; increasing frequency for the delivery of the feedback; improving use of use of work or learning plans; and including student self-assessment, the participation of workplace supervisors in the feedback process could be further encouraged and the overall learning experience enhanced.

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