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Dealing confidently with feedback: the impact of a Grow Your Academic Resilience workshop

Helen Briscoe
Edge Hill University, UK

Claire Olson
Edge Hill University, UK

Maisie Prior
Edge Hill University, UK

Abstract

A key concern for educators is that students actively receive, engage with, and implement their academic feedback. However, increasing evidence suggests that students in HE do not engage well with feedback. One way to address this concern is to look at how we can develop feedback literacy in students, which requires a level of academic resilience. Resilience in an academic context is known to increase retention and students' engagement in their learning, as well as supporting workplace readiness. This research looks at students' readiness and willingness to engage with their academic feedback and assesses whether learning about academic resilience can improve feedback engagement. Two cohorts of students were identified to take part in a Grow Your Academic Resilience (GYAR) Workshop. Using a mixed methods approach, participants were invited to complete a pre- and post-session questionnaire. Participants quantitatively rated their pre- and post-session confidence about dealing constructively with academic feedback, while free-text responses provided qualitative data. Findings suggest that offering students practical tools and strategies increases their willingness and confidence in engaging with and acting upon their feedback.

Keywords: feedback; resilience; academic resilience.

Introduction

As Learning Developers, we regularly support students with many elements of their academic work. However, one of our most complex tasks is effectively supporting students to actively receive, engage with, and most importantly, act upon their feedback. We know from academic tutors that some students never even open their assignment feedback, which is particularly disheartening, as research suggests that feedback is one of the most powerful influences upon academic achievement (Carless and Boud, 2018).

We recognise that receiving feedback can be a challenging and emotive experience for students, but ultimately it can be the key to developing essential academic skills. If students feel that feedback is critical, they can exhibit a defensive response which can affect the likelihood that they will engage with constructive suggestions to support their development (Robinson, Pope and Holyoak, 2013; Forsythe and Johnson, 2017). Our challenge is to focus not on the feedback itself, but rather the readiness and willingness of the student to engage with it.

When critiquing literature focusing on feedback and academic resilience, it is interesting to note that academic resilience is widely discussed, but less so when looking at its relationship with academic feedback. However, the terms are brought together nicely by To (2016), who argues that developing 'feedback resilience' in students supports their ability to deal with any negative emotions during the process of receiving feedback. Fostering students' resilience skills also encourages them to recognise the importance of making mistakes, and how this reveals further opportunities to learn and grow. A range of arguments discussing the importance of empowering students to become more resilient exist (see for example, Ainscough et al., 2018; Shafi et al., 2018), with the work of Anthoney, Stead and Turney (2017) in particular, highlighting the role Learning Developers can play within this field. To support our students in enhancing this skill, we developed the Grow Your Academic Resilience Workshop (GYAR).

During this process it was important to recognise and define that the broader realm of resilience and the specificity of academic resilience are two separate (yet interlinked) entities. The following definition of resilience as 'the ability to recover – to bounce back – from misfortune and to adjust easily to change' (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017, p.8) therefore underpins subsequent discussion. Martin and Marsh who are key contributors to the

research on academic resilience defined it as 'students' ability to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges' (2008, p.53). Indeed, it is these definitions which are used here to define both resilience and academic resilience. As Learning Developers, our role of supporting students to develop strategies and undertake activities to increase their feedback resilience, may be a crucial step in encouraging more conscious and effective engagement with academic feedback. Consequently, we identified and investigated the following research question: does an Academic Resilience session impact students' confidence in dealing with feedback?

Literature review

Feedback in higher education (HE) as a process is perhaps best described as messy; and with much to consider in terms of the value it brings, it is arguably a complex endeavour (Henderson, Ryan and Phillips, 2019). Students' engagement with feedback plays a pivotal role in their learning and is therefore an area of primary concern for the HE professionals supporting them on their journey (Nash and Winstone, 2017). This is not least the case for Learning Developers, who are often faced with students seeking support on how to approach the feedback they have been given. In this way we are perhaps uniquely positioned to help with the 'hidden recipience' of feedback, in that while tutors can be assured students have access to constructive comments on their work, there is still work to be done in understanding what happens next (Price, Handley and Millar, 2011; Gravett and Winstone, 2019).

Whilst assessment feedback is recognised as one of the most important elements within the learning process (Carless and Boud, 2018; Henderson, Ryan and Philips, 2019), there is a lack of consensus on where the responsibility lies regarding effective feedback. Stone and Heen noted, 'When we give feedback, we notice that the receiver isn't good at receiving it. When we receive feedback, we notice that the giver isn't good at giving it' (2014, p.3). This dichotomy over who is responsible is a delicate debate, with some students blaming their tutors for lack of constructive comments, and some tutors citing poor engagement from the students themselves. Arguably, this highlights the importance of developing students' resilience, particularly when feedback is not given in the way they anticipated or hoped for. When considering emotions and feedback, Molloy, Borrell-Carrio and Epstein (2013) suggested it may not be how we deliver feedback, but rather how the

student views themselves and their own capacity to change, and it is this capacity to adapt and develop which can potentially empower academic resilience. Even when feedback triggers strong emotional responses, resilient students can effectively manage and adjust any emotions that arise during the feedback process, enabling them to deal constructively with feedback and improve their work (To, 2016; Shafi et al., 2018). Equipping students with tools and strategies to deal with potentially disappointing results is an important responsibility for educators, and as Learning Developers we are in a prominent position to facilitate this.

Research also identifies the importance of creating feedback which engages students in the learning process and supports their motivation to develop academically (Timmis et al., 2016). Feedback should be constructive, with a focus on enabling students to recognise what good quality work in their subject area looks like (Hounsell et al., 2008). However, a key concern for educators is how to ensure that students actively receive, engage with, and implement this feedback (Hattie, 2009; Winstone et al., 2017a). Developing feedback literacy is a practical way to ensure that students understand they have an active role in the feedback process; recognising how to engage with and evaluate feedback, as well as subsequently acting upon it (Carless and Boud, 2018). Importantly, if students do not perceive feedback to be relevant or useful, they are less likely to engage with, or act upon it (van der Kleij, 2019), therefore supporting the development of feedback resilience offers Learning Developers a way to help mitigate this concern.

Empowering students to become more resilient is essential, as this has been recognised as being an antecedent to academic achievement and student wellbeing (Turner, Scott-Young and Holdsworth, 2017; Calo et al., 2019). Building resilience early in the higher education experience can also increase retention, and academic resilience can offer a protective factor, helping students to navigate stressful situations and achieve higher rates of success (Allan, McKenna and Dominey, 2014; Ayala and Manzano, 2018). When students lack resilience they are less likely to be able to cope with hinderances such as academic failure; consequently developing interventions which can enable them to confidently respond to challenges is vital (Ainscough et al., 2018). Effective interventions can help students develop a feeling of engagement and belonging by encouraging meaningful interaction as well as fostering development of skills, knowledge, and confidence (Forsthye and Johnson, 2017; Thomas, 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge that a resilience-building approach to higher education contrasts with many

traditional student support strategies in that it allows students to fail so that they can learn from their mistakes (Stoffel and Cain, 2018; Ajjawi et al., 2019). In a sector that thrives upon academic success, this may at first seem counterintuitive. However, there is substantial evidence to suggest that this approach not only supports academic success, but also that it prepares students to become workplace-ready (e.g., Shin and Kelly, 2015; Buyukgoze-Kavas, 2016; Brewer et al., 2019), which is a key goal for educators. As such the recognition that universities have a role to play in fostering resilience is essential. One way to develop resilience in students is through a growth mindset approach to learning. Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) is an important concept which recognises key assumptions about the malleability of individual qualities, such as intelligence (Yeager and Dweck, 2012; Zeng, Hou and Peng, 2016). Learners who recognise that their academic ability is not fixed, are more likely to seek feedback as a strategy to improve their performance (Cutumisu, 2019). Furthermore, research by Forsythe and Johnson (2017) found that students with a growth mindset were more motivated to act upon feedback and engage in strategies to develop their academic abilities. Calo et al. (2019) recognised that traits such as growth mindset and resilience correlate to academic success and suggest that they are essential to optimal learning. Consequently, Dweck's (2006) Mindset Theory underpins much of what is discussed during the GYAR workshop.

The Grow Your Academic Resilience workshop

The GYAR workshop was designed to offer students the opportunity to learn how their mindset and resilience can be developed, and to support those wanting to foster skills to be able to bounce back from academic setbacks quicker. The workshop covers:

- The importance of being academically resilient at university.
- Practical tools to nurture academic resilience.
- The qualities of those with a 'growth' or 'fixed' mindset.
- How to deal constructively with feedback.

Throughout this interactive workshop, students take part in a range of activities designed to increase resilience through goal setting and action planning. To begin with, students undertake a mindset quiz to determine whether they have a fixed, growth or mixed mindset, this also allows them to begin to consider how resilience and mindset may

interlink. This is followed by an activity in which students action plan a short-term academic goal, focusing not only on what they want to improve or achieve, but also recognising the skills they can already bring to support this goal to fruition (see Figure 1). This is important, as the workshop encourages students to reflect on their experiences (both positive and negative) to help develop their study strategies.

Figure 1. Grow Your Academic Resilience worksheet example.

The final activity within the workshop allows students to apply what has been discussed about building academic resilience and confidence in relation to specifically dealing with their academic feedback. Students are prompted to think about their current academic feedback; questioning how/if they currently engage with it and how they could action plan their feedback going forward. (All practical activity worksheets can be accessed via the accompanying online toolkit).

Methods

Two suitable cohorts of Education students were identified, due to their tutor's prior interest in having the GYAR workshop delivered to their students. Data collection took place within timetabled lectures, over a fortnightly period, early in 2020. The first session

ran two weeks in advance of students receiving summative feedback, however they had already experienced receiving feedback from a formative assessment earlier in this module. Students attending the second session had already received summative feedback when the GYAR workshop took place. No distinction was made between the two cohorts in terms of analysis, due to the small number of participants surveyed (25) and that they were students from the same faculty. It is therefore worth noting that a larger scale study may benefit from the opportunity to interrogate data based on year of study or chosen subject to provide comparative results. It is also important to acknowledge that the experiences of students who had only received formative feedback may have been different from those who are also familiar with summative feedback.

Data was collected via an anonymous questionnaire, devised to provide both statistical data and anecdotal responses. The questionnaire also collected data from before and after each session, to establish whether the workshop itself has the potential to impact upon confidence levels in dealing with academic feedback. At the start and end of each workshop, students were asked to reflect on how confident they felt about dealing constructively with academic feedback. By identifying students' pre-existing confidence levels and their feelings around receiving feedback we can begin to understand the issues that are stopping students from engaging with, and acting upon, feedback. Further, the re-evaluation of confidence levels after the GYAR workshop, can begin to offer insight into the potential effectiveness of this academic skills intervention.

Before we delivered the GYAR workshop, participants were invited to answer the following questions:

1. What words or feelings come to mind when you think about receiving 'feedback'?

2a. Before today's session, how confident were you in dealing constructively with academic feedback? (Using a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = Not confident, and 10 = Very confident)

2b. Why?

After participating in the workshop, students were then invited to complete the remaining element of the questionnaire by answering the following questions:

3a. Now, having participated in an Academic Resilience session, how confident do
you feel about dealing constructively with academic feedback? (Using a scale of
1 – 10, where 1 = Not confident, and 10 = Very confident)

3b. Why?

4. What would stop you from engaging with academic feedback?

5. What would encourage you to engage more actively with academic feedback?

6. Any other comments …?

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted in line with the institution's Research Ethics Policy and
Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association
(BERA), 2018). It was noted that students would be signposted to relevant support
departments should any emotional or wellbeing issues arise due to discussions around the
themes of resilience and dealing with academic feedback.

Data analysis

Once collected, data was transcribed and analysed. Pre-session qualitative responses
relating to feedback were collated by frequency and categorised into 'positive', 'negative'
and 'neutral' responses. Quantitative data was examined to determine average confidence
levels in dealing with academic feedback both pre- and post-session, alongside further
analysis to identify any potential trends. Thematic analysis of the pre- and post-session
qualitative data was then undertaken, with codes manually assigned to generate initial
categories (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Our familiarity with the subject area allowed us
to contextualise the participants' responses, and look for recurring topics and ideas, or key
words/phrases. Three key themes emerged from the data: emotional response, student
autonomy, and [un]constructive feedback (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Qualitative themes.
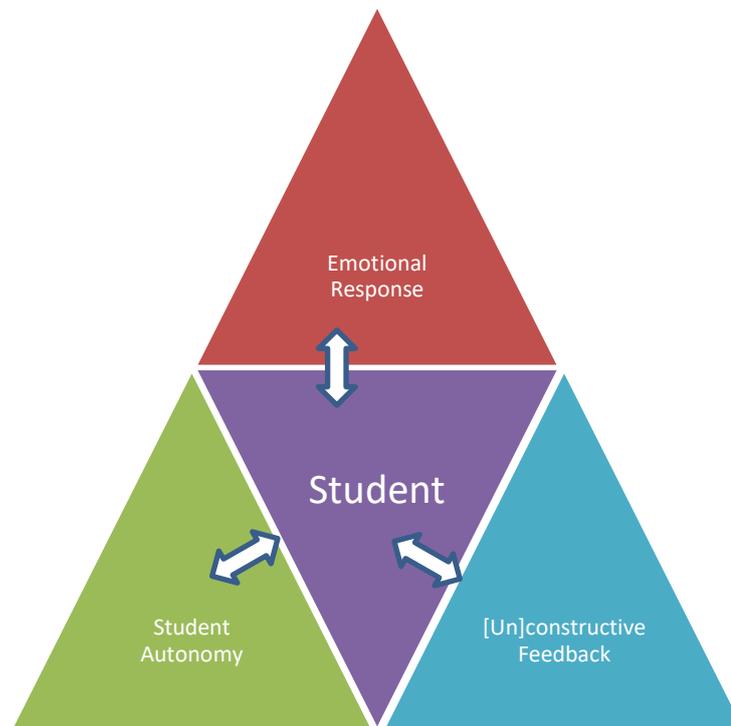
Findings and discussion

Feedback words

Participants were invited pre-session to note down any words or feelings that came to mind when thinking about receiving feedback. Analysis of this data revealed 48 unique words and phrases, which are represented in a word cloud (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Word cloud of feedback words (weighted by frequency).

Words were categorised into 'positive' (23), 'negative' (21) and 'neutral' (4). It was surprising to see slightly more positive terms than negative terms, perhaps indicating that whilst some students may struggle to understand what their feedback is telling them, there are still good student perceptions about feedback (Voelkel, Varga-Atkins and Mello, 2020). When weighted by frequency, 47% of the words used were 'positive', 47% 'negative' and 6% 'neutral'. Whilst it is important to recognise that these groupings are subjective, the categorisations were agreed upon by all the researchers. This activity generated an interesting range of responses and was designed to identify how students' currently feel when they think about receiving feedback. However, it may have been useful to have repeated this exercise after the GYAR workshop to determine whether post-session qualitative responses reflected the positive change in confidence identified in the quantitative data.

Confidence scores

Prior to the start of the GYAR workshop, participants were asked to rate how confident they felt in dealing constructively with academic feedback, using a sliding scale from 1-10 (1 being not confident and 10 very confident). They were then asked to complete this same question again once they had completed the GYAR workshop, to determine if the data could provide the opportunity to argue any potential consequential change in their

confidence levels. Prior to the session an average score of 5.92 was recorded, whereas after the session, the average rose to 8.04, a percentage increase of 35.8% (see Figure 4), which indicates that interventions such as this are a positive way in supporting feedback literacy and improving the student experience. It is important to acknowledge that the validity of self-report constructs is often contested (Kormos and Gifford, 2014), however, Stankov, Kleitman and Jackson's (2015) analysis of self-reported confidence measures, demonstrated that they have excellent predictive validity, and accurately reflect students' perceptions of their own performance.

Figure 4. Average levels of confidence in dealing with academic feedback.
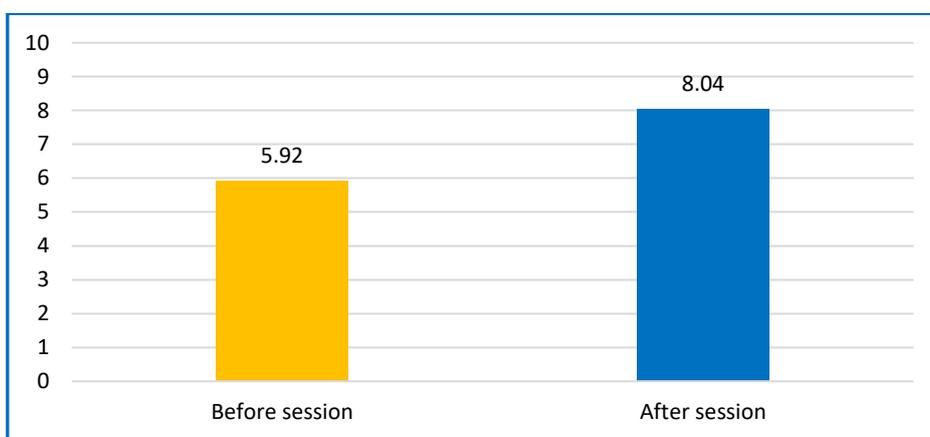
Deeper analysis of individual participants' responses also revealed that the confidence level increased after the session for 20 out of the 25 students surveyed (80%) and remained the same for the other five (20%). Importantly, no participants stated that their confidence had decreased. Where confidence levels did not increase, students had already rated themselves at the top end of the confidence scale (6,7,7,8, and 9). Whereas those who initially posted low scores, (1-4) all recorded post-session ratings that had increased by a minimum of two points on the scale (see Figure 5). The overall increase in average confidence levels, suggests that that resilience building approaches, such as those shared in the GYAR workshop, offer the potential to increase students' willingness and confidence to engage with, and act upon their feedback.

Figure 5. Levels of confidence in dealing with academic feedback.
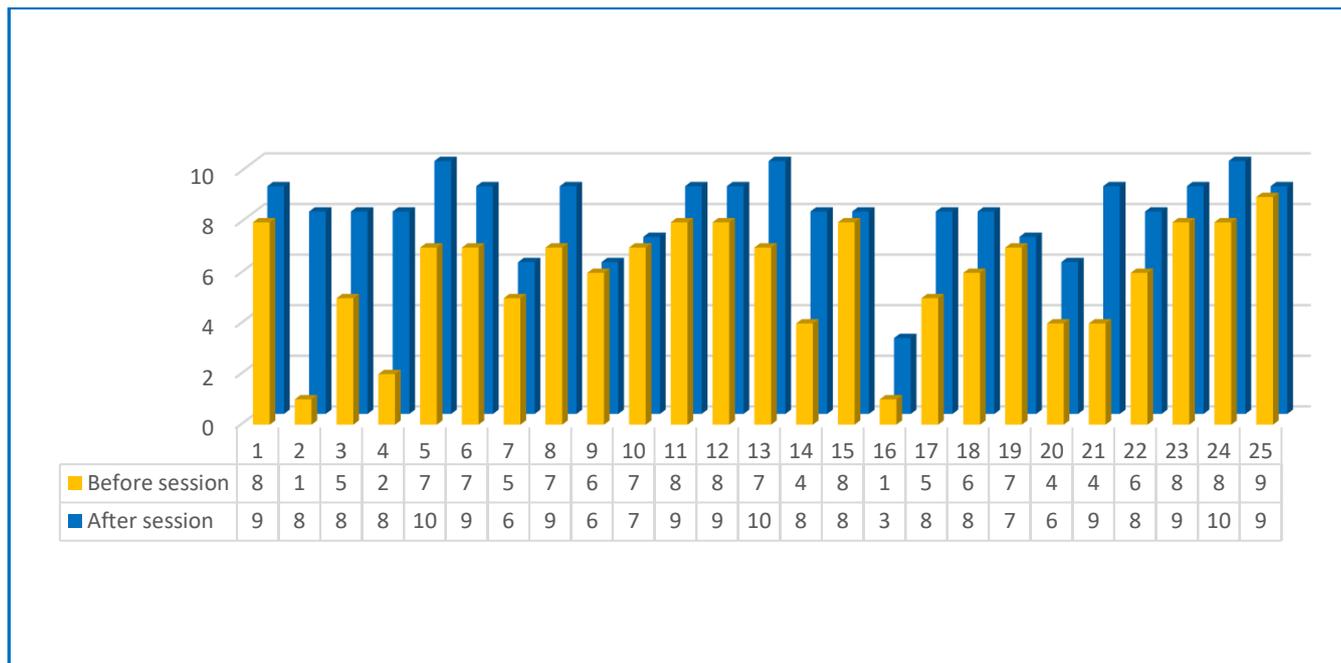
Confidence in academic ability has been demonstrated to be a clear predictor of academic achievement, specifically in student populations (Burns, Burns and Ward, 2016). Notably, self-reported confidence in a particular skill is found to be a successful indicator of actual ability because it relies upon the student reflecting on, and evaluating their past behaviour (Stankov, Morony and Lee, 2013). Overall, 80% of participants reported an increase in their confidence score after taking part in the GYAR session. This appears to suggest that the GYAR workshop was effective in increasing most of the students' confidence in dealing with academic feedback. However, it is important to recognise that whilst students indicated that confidence had improved immediately after the session, it is not possible to know whether this was maintained when students next received feedback.

Thematic analysis

While the effectiveness of the session was evaluated using quantitative data, qualitative data offers more contextual depth to the findings. Three key themes emerged from the qualitative data: emotional response, student autonomy, and [un]constructive feedback. Data relating to the Emotional Response theme was gathered in relation to the first pre-session question, 'What words or feelings come to mind when you think about receiving

"feedback"?' The other two themes developed from both the pre- and post-session responses.

Theme 1: Emotional response

The most common reaction to why students felt the way they did about dealing with academic feedback was emotional, and many of these responses were negative in tone. For example, when considering their current level of confidence in dealing with academic feedback, one participant stated that it could, 'make me unmotivated when negative'. Feedback is also sometimes taken personally: '[I] would always take everything personal/make out that a bit of negative feedback ment [sic] my work was rubbish/not good enough'.

This sentiment is echoed by other students who felt that receiving feedback reinforced feelings about their 'fear of not being good enough' and that 'sometimes academic feedback can be disheartening'. The volume of negative reactions suggests that for many students, the idea of receiving feedback is challenging. When students are upset by comments, they can become demoralised, with perception of academic failure (real or imagined) negatively impacting wellbeing and increasing the risk of dropout (Robinson, Pope and Holyoak, 2013; Carless and Boud, 2018; Ajjawi et al., 2019). This highlights how receiving feedback can be emotionally turbulent for students, a finding mirrored by several other scholars (Weaver, 2006; Atmaca, 2016; Shellenbarger, Gazza and Hunker, 2018). While on the one hand it could be argued that nerves or worry are normal and show conscientiousness, it could, in some cases, escalate to an unhealthy relationship or association with the learning process (Weaver, 2006; Shellenbarger, Gazza and Hunker, 2018).

However, not all emotional responses were negative, and it is encouraging to see several positive reactions from participants, including, 'any positive points are usually a small confidence boost', and one student who is 'happy to receive helpful feedback that will help me develop my work'. Just over a third of all responses relating to an emotional response discussed positive emotions. Many students also recognised the importance of receiving 'feedback for academic development', with one acknowledging that 'most feedback is given to allow you to improve your work, even if it doesn't sound positive it allows you to know what to work on'.

Our emotions arguably play an important role in how well we engage with feedback, to the extent in which Lowe (2018) argued for a 'compassionate pedagogy' when dealing with feedback, a reminder perhaps that we are after all human and it is not always easy to take on board criticism, even when it is meant to be constructive.

Theme 2: Student autonomy

Student autonomy featured mostly as a post-session theme. Responses revealed that many participants were able to understand the importance of making mistakes and could acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses. Examples of participants demonstrating autonomy included how they understand their 'own ways of working/limitations and strengths', can give themselves 'targets from concise feedback' and can 'reflect on feedback'. Reflection upon the benefit of feedback was an important realisation for several students, with one stating 'I will never be 100% confident, however now I appreciate more that feedback is going to help me develop'.

This feeling is reiterated by another student who noted that the GYAR workshop 'helped me understand that feedback can be useful rather than being something I am scared of'. This supports the work of Iraj et al. (2020), who discuss the importance of self-regulation within feedback, particularly to close the 'feedback gap' (Dawson et al., 2018a) and encourage students to become responsible for actioning their feedback.

Utilising the resources provided in the GYAR workshop, is one way for students to ensure that they are actively engaging with their feedback. One participant recognised that 'filling out the feedback grid will definitely help me to positively reflect rather than focus on negatives'.

Students were introduced to a feedback plan and encouraged to create their own as a means of collating similar comments across one or multiple past assignments. Several students noted the value of practical resources, and one specifically highlighted the usefulness of the feedback plan, recognising that it helped [me know] what action I should take. This is particularly interesting because the student details why they found it useful – it gave them a next step. By being proactive, such as making plans and setting goals, students are demonstrating self-efficacy, which is an important element of autonomy. Martin and Marsh (2008) identified self-efficacy as a predictive factor of students' everyday

academic resilience, therefore supporting students to develop self-efficacy will offer greater likelihood of both student satisfaction and success.

The acknowledgement that a growth mindset is something that would encourage students to actively engage with feedback is essential when considering the impact of an academic resilience session. Stoffel and Cain (2018) propose that teaching a growth mindset in an academic setting, not only promotes resilience, but can actively change student behaviour. After the GYAR workshop students clearly recognised 'the desire to do well and develop my skills', and 'being passionate about the subject' as ways to support active engagement with academic feedback. Interestingly, recent research also suggests that growth mindset does not just impact upon feedback-seeking behaviour as a way to develop, but that it also appears to positively drive the way students respond to critical feedback (Cutumisu, 2019).

The concept of growth mindset clearly had an impact as one student cited that their current feelings about dealing constructively with academic feedback were based on having a 'better understanding [of] the mindset needed to take on board and develop after feedback'. Which is perhaps crucial to acknowledge given that students also highlighted when feedback lacks the value to make it beneficial.

Theme 3: [Un]constructive Feedback

One theme which featured highly pre-session was understanding and dealing with [un]constructive feedback. Participants rated their own confidence in dealing with feedback, citing examples such as 'I feel like some feedback is vague and focuses on errors', and 'sometimes the feedback is not specific enough to improve' or it 'lacks clear direction'. This itself could be an arguable barrier to building academic resilience, as whilst the GYAR workshop aims to build this skill, students ultimately need to understand their academic feedback to perceive value in it (Winstone et al., 2017b) and to engage effectively.

Multiple students cited similar reasons for not engaging with feedback, such as 'poor quality feedback with limited guidance'. One participant also recognised that feedback would be difficult to engage with 'if it was delivered in a harsh/unhelpful manner'. Recognising resilience as an important attribute when receiving feedback was also

identified by another student, who acknowledged that 'if the feedback was predominantly negative, I would find it hard to be resilient'.

Importantly, if students were assured their feedback would be constructive, and by nature developmental, this might help reframe the narrative of it being something to fear. The issue remains however if students interpret constructive as meaning negative, which reinforces the value of teaching of growth mindsets in our resilience workshop. With recent research demonstrating the positive impact of growth mindset on feedback-seeking behaviours among students (Xu and Wang, 2023), this reinforces the value in developing resilience interventions such as the GYAR workshop. However, it is also important to recognise that increasing students' resilience to deal confidently with feedback cannot be effective unless educators also take responsibility for making it timely and useful (Carless and Boud, 2018; Carless, 2019).

When asked to identify what would encourage students to engage more actively with academic feedback, most respondents referred to the presentation and quality of feedback as an important element. The ability to be able to apply feedback to future work was also an essential element for participants, with one student requesting 'sections/targets on how to improve, rather than sporadic comments'.

Receiving high quality constructive feedback which is 'more detailed', 'specific' and 'clearer' are all concerns for students. The responses to this question therefore suggest that students are keen to seek more constructive feedback but are perhaps restricted by the format in which it is currently presented. This reflects the research by Dawson et al. (2018b) who found that students identified effective feedback as something that is high-quality, personalised, and usable.

Limitations and future research

It is worth noting that whilst the quantitative data allowed us to assess the effectiveness of the GYAR workshop, the methods employed did not allow for the qualitative data to be analysed in the same way. In hindsight, replicating the pre-session qualitative questions after the workshop would have allowed us to distinguish whether the variable of adding a workshop intervention had any meaningful impact.

Limitations can also potentially be found in the small number of participants who took part in this study. It would therefore be recommended to involve a greater number of participants, also those from different faculties, subjects, years of study or even different universities for future research. A control group which assesses students' responses pre- and post-assessment could also potentially be beneficial in enabling us to assess the effectiveness of the GYAR workshop. A longitudinal study could offer the opportunity to track a cohort across their academic journey, encompassing how students engage with and act upon feedback from both formative and summative assessments.

Conclusion

The identification of key themes, emotional response, student autonomy, and [un]constructive feedback, each provided insight into factors that can impact how well students engage and act upon their academic feedback. The research has also demonstrated that developing a growth mindset and nurturing resilience can have a positive impact upon students' confidence in dealing with their academic feedback. We recognise the limitations of our small-scale approach and acknowledge that it would be difficult for institutions outside of our own to justify implementing a similar workshop on these findings alone. However, the qualitative evidence indicates that this academic resilience session has positively influenced our students' readiness and willingness to engage with feedback more generally. Returning to the concept of 'feedback resilience' (To, 2016), our research indicates that by supporting students to develop this skill, Learning Developers are well placed to increase more conscious and effective engagement with academic feedback.

Our findings suggest that the GYAR workshop can provide helpful resources, encourage students to take control of their own learning and give a reassuring sense of direction in what can be an emotive experience. As Learning Developers this subsequently gives merit to continuing to develop and integrate the workshop within our offer, as well as sharing our results, learnings and resources with tutors, module leaders and the wider Learning Development community. Consequently, all resources used with the GYAR workshop are available for other practitioners to access.

Acknowledgements

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Author details

Helen Briscoe has supported students in Higher Education Institutions for 22 years. She
currently works as an Academic Skills Advisor at Edge Hill University, where she delivers
academic writing support through embedded teaching sessions, workshops, webinars, and
one-to-ones. Helen has worked as a Learning Facilitator, mentoring students with a range
of complex mental health needs throughout their time at university. Helen has a passion
for academic integrity and has recently created an innovative Referencing and Academic
Integrity Toolkit to support students and staff. Helen is a Fellow of the Higher Education
Academy and has recently been awarded ALDinHE Certified Practitioner status.

Claire Olson is an Academic Skills Advisor at Edge Hill University. Having worked within
education and training for 20 years, Claire has had held a variety of roles within Museums
and Galleries, further education and most recently in higher education. Having joined Edge

Hill University in 2016, Claire currently teaches and supports students with their academic writing via embedded sessions, workshops and one-to-one appointments. Claire holds a BA in Art History, an MA in Museum Studies and a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Maisie Prior is an Academic Skills Advisor at Edge Hill University, where she teaches academic writing and information literacy through a mix of embedded lectures, workshops and one-to-one tutorials. Prior to working in higher education, she trained as a secondary school teacher of Modern Foreign Languages, having previously taught English across a variety of ages in Spain and Italy. Maisie holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (with Qualified Teacher Status) and a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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