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Investigating Non-Engagement with Feedback in HE as a Social Practice

Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education

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Investigating Non-Engagement with Feedback in HE as a Social Practice

Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education

Abstract

Quality in feedback processes rests on students' engagement with them. A crucial question is therefore why students do not always engage. Scholars have defined engagement as a social practice, pointing to the influence of context but without explaining its nature. The purpose of this article is to argue that existing approaches without a theory of the social cannot fully explain non-engagement and that a practice theoretical approach may fill this gap. It introduces Steven Kemmis et al.'s practice ontology and demonstrates how a feedback practice can be analysed to explain a weak engagement. The article's contribution to research in engagement with feedback is a new ontology of practice and its methodological apparatus.

Keywords: feedback, engagement with feedback, practice theory, Stephen Kemmis, Theodore Schatzki

Introduction

Researchers recognise formative feedback to be one of the most effective learning activities for reducing the gap between where the student is and where s/he is striving to get (Sadler 1989). According to more recent literature, it is furthermore critical for enabling students to evaluate their own work and thereby enhancing their self-regulation (Boud 2000; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Boud and Molloy 2013; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014; Carless 2015). Students want more formative feedback (Blair et al. 2013), and national councils expect that meeting this wish will lead to a higher learning outcome (Governmental committee to the improvement of higher educations 2018).

Students, however, do not always seem to engage with the formative feedback that they get (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Sinclair and Cleland 2007;

Mulliner and Tucker 2017; Winstone et al. 2017b; Blair et al. 2013), which appears to be a problem that needs further examination. It is therefore the object of interest in this article.

The research to date has tended to focus on how feedback can trigger a cognitive change in the student. The last 30 years have seen a development in this area: From considering the content and delivery of information (e.g Ramaprasad 1983) to considering student involvement in feedback processes (e.g. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) crucial for their cognitive response to feedback and willingness to act on it.

A strand in more recent literature, however, argues that focus should not be on the effectiveness of specific intervention methods, suggesting that what matters is solely whether students engage with feedback and that not only the organisation of feedback, but also the social context should be considered in the search for explanations of engagement (or lack of it) (Handley, Price, and Millar 2011; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). Therefore, it suggests to consider engagement with feedback a social practice.

This article pursues this idea, but suggests to understand engagement with feedback as a phenomenon to the social practice of feedback. It proposes to use a practice theoretical approach preoccupied with disclosing the nature of social practices and how they relate to their social context. The approach is based on the analytical framework of Stephen Kemmis et al. (2014) and the underlying practice ontology of Theodore Schatzki (2002). It claims that considering human action as organised in nexuses and situated in contingent contexts (Schatzki 2002) offers access to explanations that are not accessible to cognitive psychology. The article thus seeks to investigate which theoretical apparatus is needed to analyse formative feedback in order to better understand why some students are reticent to engage with it. It argues that by ontologically considering feedback as a social practice, it is possible to demonstrate that it might sometimes make sense to students *not* to engage with feedback.

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The following text (1) demonstrates how, in spite of a growing focus on the student as agent in feedback processes, cognitive and constructivist feedback research only partially explains students' non-engagement with feedback, (2) suggests an ontology of social practice and a framework for analysis that can provide an understanding of non-engagement and (3) supports its theoretical points with an illustrative example. This practice theoretical approach is a first attempt to use a coherent social theory on human action to explain students' engagement with feedback

From transmission to engagement

This section will argue that, in spite of a growing focus on the student as primary agent, cognitive and constructivist feedback research, misses important insights into students' non-engagement with feedback. It will follow the two paradigms identified by Carless of feedback as information and feedback as process (Carless 2015, 192) and present an approach within the second paradigm that suggests research to leave the focus on parameters of effectiveness and instead concentrate on understanding premises for students' engagement with feedback (Handley, Price, and Millar 2011).

The information paradigm

The first contributions to feedback research adopt behaviouristic and cognitive perspectives. From a behaviourist perspective, students are expected to act on advice given as simple transmission of information and to ascribe the same meaning and importance to the information as the sender (Stewart 2012; Boud and Molloy 2013). To my experience, this is still a widespread belief in many classrooms.

A cognitivist perspective is preoccupied with the quality of information and its delivery. To Ramaprasad, feedback is 'information about the gap between the actual level and the

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reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (Ramaprasad 1983, 4). Feedback must therefore be formative and characterised by features such as the following: It should be (i) based on criteria (Ramaprasad 1983; Sadler 1989), (ii) concrete but still sufficiently general to be transmittable to subsequent assignments (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Carless 2006), (iii) provided with such a timeliness that students can see the meaning in using it (Black and Wiliam 1998; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011; Blair et al. 2013) and (iiii) understandable (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001; Carless 2006).

In both perspectives, the result of feedback relies entirely on the lecturer's action, and the question of the students' engagement is therefore not addressed (Boud and Molloy 2013). In this paradigm, the transfer of feedback takes place between a lecturer and an individual student, and therefore its social space is rather small. There is a claim for feedback to be used by the student, but the responsibility for that to happen relies on the teacher delivering the information. Researchers have thus acknowledged that feedback in this approach remains 'telling', bearing the risk of remaining 'dangling data' (Boud and Molloy 2013, 699) if students fail to engage with it and therefore leading to too little improvement in subsequent work (Sadler 2010).

The process paradigm

The next contributions to feedback research come from social constructivists, changing the perspective from the delivery of information to a preoccupation with the way students learn. In Nicol's wording, feedback is 'a dialogical and contingent two-way process that involves coordinated teacher-student and peer-to-peer interaction as well as active learner engagement' (Nicol 2010, 503). Learners must use feedback to construct knowledge. To Carless, students even become the primary agent in the feedback process. He establishes that 'feedback is a dialogic process in which learners make sense of information from varied sources and use it to

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enhance the quality of their work or learning strategy'. This process includes sharing of interpretations, negotiating of meaning and clarifying of expectations (2015, 192). Feedback becomes co-construction.

At the same time and with approximately the same researchers, a meta-cognitivist strand asserts that students learn better if they are able to control their own learning process. It stresses the need for feedback to be sustainable and to enable students to make the evaluative judgements about the work themselves with a long-term purpose of turning them into self-regulated learners (Boud 2000; Nicol 2009; Sadler 2010). To that end, students must take up the role of providers of feedback (Sadler 2010; Nicol 2014). However, the ability to make evaluative judgements on higher-order assessment tasks is a skill that lecturers gain from their experience with a large number of assignments (Sadler 2010). For students to become able to make judgements, lecturers thus need to involve them in peer assessments designed with the intent to give them practical experience and skills as well as the necessary conceptual knowledge. Feedback events should furthermore be iterative and incorporated in the teaching programme as a series of feedback loops (Hounsell et al. 2008; Carless 2015) and provided when and in such a way that students use it to improve their performance in the actual work or in subsequent tasks (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Carless et al. 2011).

In this paradigm, equally rooted in cognitive psychology, learning is still a purely cognitive activity, and the focus remains on the individual, but there is a change of agency. Realising that students must themselves assume the role as agents in their learning process, the lecturer's role is now to organise feedback in ways that allow this to happen. In this perspective, the lecturer loses control, as the outcome of formative feedback entirely depends on the students' engagement with it. The social space for feedback has grown: Students are now designated to provide formative feedback to each other, which means that an activity based on

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a hitherto asymmetrical teacher-student relation must now be carried out in symmetrical relationships.

The students have been put to work: As the primary agent in their knowledge construction, they have to enter into dialogues about learning, use their feedback and learn to provide feedback themselves to achieve the skills to control their learning process and evaluate their work. While these activities are most likely to make feedback promote learning, their success relies on how students engage with them. Students, however, will not necessarily engage in time-consuming, cognitively and socially demanding feedback activities, even if these are said to affect their knowledge construction.

Engagement with feedback

Data from several studies suggest non-engagement with classic teacher feedback to be an issue that should not be neglected. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) report of a majority of students paying ‘close attention’ to received comments and to ‘bearing them in mind’. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) refer to some studies showing that students were skim-reading the comments. Hounsell reports of students not collecting their feedback (2007), a tendency supported by 46% of the students in Sinclair & Cleland’s study with 360 medical students (2007). Half of the students in Bevan et al. (2008) admitted that they had forgotten the suggestions for improvement at the time of the following coursework, and another half did not use the feedback when revising their work. These are just examples, but among lecturers, there seem to be even more pessimistic assumptions of the problem (Mulliner and Tucker 2017), and researchers such as David Nicol, Beaumont, Hounsell and Price all stress the need for students to engage more with feedback (Blair et al. 2013).

In this literature, suggested reasons for non-engagement revolve around the organisation of feedback. The dialogue that students need in order to clarify understanding (Higgins, Hartley,

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and Skelton 2001; 2002; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Carless 2006; Nicol 2010; Price et al. 2010; Blair 2017), is problematic because of the ‘massification’ of higher education and a resultant retention of one-way communication in the provision of feedback (Nicol 2010). Students lack guidance about how to understand and use feedback (Blair et al. 2013), and assessment designs can lack requirements for students to engage with formative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Blair et al. 2013). The engagement approach, however, also widens the area of explanation to include reasons outside the organisation of feedback (Handley, Price, and Millar 2011) (see also (Winstone et al. 2017a)). Reasons connected to the teacher concern for instance reciprocity (the teacher has done a job comparable to the writer's), availability, attitude and credibility (Price, Handley, and Millar 2011).

Price, Handley, Millar and O’Donovan therefore criticise the literature on feedback for a misplaced focus on the effectiveness of feedback interventions. They claim that the attention be instead drawn to what makes students engage with feedback (Price et al. 2010; Handley, Price, and Millar 2011; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011) and insist on the need to include social environments as explanatory elements (Handley, Price, and Millar 2011, 547). They assert that situational contexts influence on students’ engagement as well as on students and teachers’ expectations about what feedback is or should be and about the norms of engagement. Students’ engagement is furthermore influenced by judgements about what constitutes positive patterns of interactions implied in assumptions about processes of learning and teaching (2011, 550). On the basis of these considerations, they conceptualise engagement as a social practice. Engagement with feedback is defined as students’ involvement with received comments on written student assignments. It has two elements: A readiness-to-engage and an active engagement, consisting of both covert action of reflecting mindfully over feedback and overt actions (551).

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In my view it can be suggested, however, that if feedback is understood as a process that takes place in a social space in which students must engage actively by entering into dialogues with both lecturer and peers, student engagement is no longer just a potential response to received feedback. Without engagement, there is simply no feedback. We therefore need to conceptualise engagement differently.

Plausible reasons for non-engagement in this broader social space as evoked in literature on students' general academic engagement also point to contextuality. Conduit, Karpen and Farrelly assert that engagement has both cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social dimensions (2016). Hockings (2009) suggests a hierarchy of social contexts to influence engagement and Bryson (2014) stresses the importance of trust relationships, discourse and supportive social networks.

The constructivist perspective of engagement is that of an individual learner's and focuses on how each student is *individually* motivated to engage in feedback events under the influence from a *social context*. This, however, means that students individually base their actions on interpretations of the world and are individually affected by the context. Instead, this article aims to establish that people act and interact in ways that accord with norms in larger groups of individuals in overlapping practices. Relating to the world is done primarily through participation: action, training and socialisation (Buch 2014). Practice theory, therefore, has *the practice* as the unit of analysis and offers an ontology of context that explains how contextual structures determine but also are determined by social practices. Like Handley, Price and Millar's approach, it is part of a large group of practice theories interlinked by 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein 2009).

The remainder of the article will investigate how Theodore Schatzki's (2002) and Stephen Kemmis et al.'s practice theoretical approach (2014) can explain the nature and power of social context and conceptualise engagement as a phenomenon to social practice.

New ontological premises

What social context might be and how it exercises influence on humans are questions at the centre of Stephen Kemmis et al.'s work on practice and education (2012; 2014). Before turning to Kemmis, however, it will be useful to establish a number of assumptions shared by practice theorists (Nicolini 2013).

First, to practice theory, not humans, but human activity composes the foundation of the social world. Structures like institutions and organisations are also created and upheld by human activity and therefore only live as long as these activities take place. In consequence, structures, or context, not only determine but are also determined by processes in a 'two-way traffic' (Nicolini 2013, 3).

Second, practice theory considers all human action to unfold in time and space. Therefore, materiality is always interwoven with the practice: How rooms are furnished, what objects are used in the practice and how bodies perform in the practices. Considering some human actions as purely cognitive and not involving body and objects is therefore not possible. Practice theoretical thinking dissolves dichotomies such as agent-structure and body-mind: The body cannot be reduced to a mind-driven tool for calculated activity, because practice is the activity of the body.

Third, to practice theory, there is a special role for human agency. Humans are neither considered rational decision makers nor blind rule-followers. They tend to follow the norms within laid out practices but will also, by their performance of the practice, leave their imprints on it. They are therefore said to be 'carriers' of practices.

Forth, in foregrounding activity as the basic foundation of the social world, practice theory changes the conceptions of knowledge, discourse and meaning. Knowledge cannot be

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packages stored in peoples' mind, but is brought about, used and ascribed to them in carrying out practices. Similarly, language does not in itself hold meaning. Instead, meaning is created by the way we use the medium of language and in what circumstances.

Fifth, based on human activity, practices are arenas for interest, conflict and power that, therefore, are seen as constitutive elements of social reality.

These assumptions lead to a specific way of understanding social matters: A practice theoretical analysis must have the practice and not the practitioners as the unit of analysis. Only when we know the set of conditions in a practice, can we ask what sort of agency is made possible. Moreover, an analysis draws on the situational context to get access to the knowledge and meaning in the practice, cf. Geertz' notions of 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) as sense-making emerge from the practice – not from individuals (Nicolini 2013, 7).

Practice theory as a frame for analysis

What does it look like when we take these assumptions into an analysis of engagement with feedback as a social practice? An examination hereof will be the project in the following. To this end, we will make use of Stephen Kemmis et al's theory of *practice architecture* (Kemmis et al. 2014), which is mainly grounded in Theodore Schatzki's conception of practice as the site of the social (2002).

Schatzki teaches us that what people do and say, thus also how they enact feedback, is part of social practices. His idea of *practice* embraces two dimensions: The way people act and the way their actions are organised or bundled in nexuses (2002, 71). These nexuses consist of four normative orderings: (a) *Practical understandings* of how to perform actions pertaining to the practice, (b) *explicit rules*, (c) *a teleoaffective structure* assembling the doings and sayings that the practitioners ought to realise or that are acceptable for them to realise, and (d) *general understandings* holding up the practice, for example about work, learning or feedback.

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Practices are situated in orders or *arrangements* that comprise both the practices and the material objects and human beings enmeshed in them. Context, in this thinking, is, therefore, not only structures different from and surrounding a practice but also the organisation of the practice itself. The relation between context and practice is characterised by prefiguration, which means that context structures the possible field of action. Prefiguration can happen by constraint and enablement. Arrangements thus enable and constrain sayings and doings.

Kemmis et al. follow Schatzki's approach to practice and turn it into a frame for analysis. In order to bring forward the social-political dimension that always attends practices, they make what they refer to as *relatings* explicit. In consequence, they propose to understand practice as a form of socially established cooperative human activity of sayings, doings and relatings that shapes and is shaped by a *practice architecture* of three dimensions (Figure 1): The *material-economic arrangements* are the resources that make possible the actions undertaken in the practice – what can be done in the physical set-ups, in the physical space-time of the practice. The *cultural-discursive arrangements* are the resources that make possible the language used in and about the practice. They enable and constrain what is relevant to say in the practice or what discourse is appropriate for describing it. Finally, the *social-political arrangements* are the resources that organise the relationships between people and non-human things in the practice through the medium of power and solidarity: Rules and roles and agreements as to what to do (Kemmis et al. 2014).

An analysis as proposed by Kemmis et al. (Kemmis et al. 2014) describes the practice's doings, sayings and relatings through the lenses of four perspectives: On the individual side of the practice, we see how doings, sayings and relatings are framed within the *projects* of the actors (the teleoaffective structures) and shaped by their *practical understandings* of how to go on in the practice. On the extra-individual side of the practice, we see how the practice transpires

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in *practice landscapes* - how humans and non-human things are involved in the practice – and how the practice is informed by *general understanding* supporting the practice.

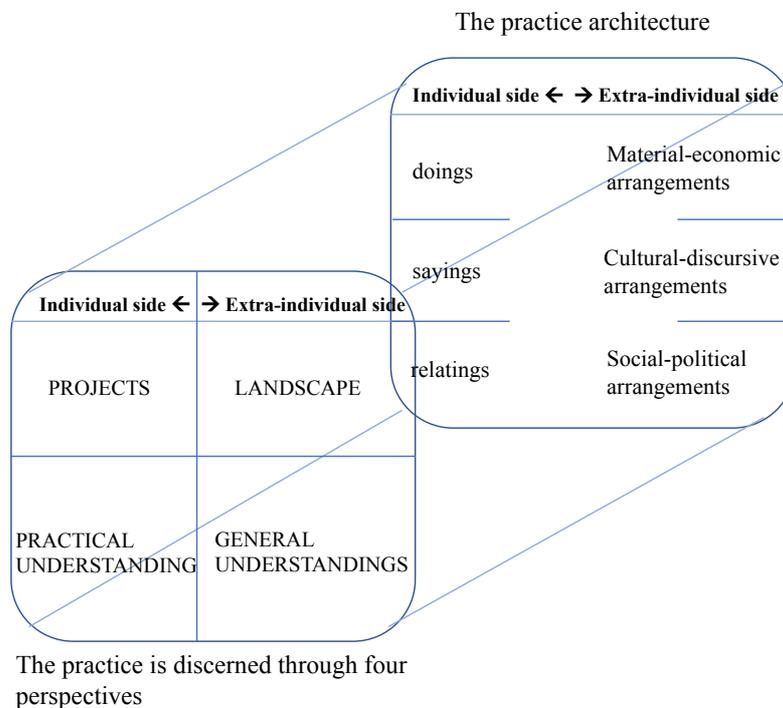


Figure 1: The practice architecture discerned through four perspectives. Adaptation from (Schatzki 2002) and (Kemmis et al. 2014).

Considering feedback as a social practice of learning therefore means to understand learning as participation: feedback is a *learning practice* that enables students to be ‘stirred into’ a *substantive practice* – the learning objectives for the course (Kemmis et al. 2014). To be ‘stirred into’ practice is Kemmis et al.’s word for being initiated into an already existing practice in a process similar to Lave and Wenger’s ‘peripheral legitimate participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991; Kemmis et al. 2014). In the following section, I will give an example of how a practice theoretical analysis can be conducted.

Example

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The example concerns the introduction of processual peer-feedback at an early stage of the producing of a text where understandings and processes are in focus and where students have good chances to use the feedback in their further writing process. Peer-feedback is chosen as an example as it is in line with the recommendations of Nicol (2014) among other social constructivists as noted in section 2. It demonstrates how changing feedback from a teacher centred to a student-centred practice enabling students to engage as providers requires at least two things: (1) Thorough considerations of how to organise peer-feedback as a learning activity but also (2) considerations of how existing practices can form constraints to the success of a new. The example is drawn from my own research but must be seen exclusively as illustrative, and in accordance with the article's problem statement, focus will be on constraints to engagement. Sources are observations as well as student and lecturer interviews. The case is as follows: A peer-feedback set-up in a second-year class on management is, by the involved lecturers, thought of as a new and useful learning activity. The students' engagement is, however, weak, and the activity turns out to become teacher feedback instead.

The unit of analysis is the feedback practice in the course. As a thorough description will be too extensive, I will instead learn about the practice by zooming in (Nicolini 2009) on the specific peer-feedback set-up and later zoom out to the practice and practices surrounding it. The zooming in will consist of a thorough description of the doings, sayings and relatings as I see them through the four perspectives: The practice landscape, the project, the practical and the general understandings (Kemmis et al. 2014; Buch 2016). In the analysis that follows, I will zoom out to show how student engagement in the peer-feedback is enabled and constrained by the feedback practice in the course and how the latter is enmeshed in surrounding practices.

Organisation of feedback in the course

In the first two semesters of the programme, the students have had very few experiences with feedback in the sense of comments on a product heard or read by the provider of feedback. There has been one oral summative teacher feedback after a written end-of-term assessment and one formative group peer feedback, which the students hardly remember. Therefore, when asked about their experiences with feedback at university, they shake their heads and can hardly recall having received any. I meet them in a third semester course on management where Annie, the lecturer in charge, has chosen to supplement the series of lectures with three working workshops for the whole class of 117 students instead of splitting the teaching up in three tutorial courses. This is to make it possible for all of the three lecturers involved in the course to be available for the students when working in groups. Annie and her colleagues think feedback to be a useful learning activity and therefore enact it in different ways throughout the course in connection with a non-graded formative assessment.

Through the workshops, the students work continuously in their study groups with a written assignment similar to the one they will meet at the examination. They are offered a series of five different feedback set-ups. The first is processual: While the students work in their groups, they can call for a lecturer to answer questions or provide feedback on their ideas. The second, which is the one that I will use as an example, is also processual: Every 45 minutes, a group is randomly assigned to present its process and another to provide peer-feedback to it supported by the lecturers. This happens in front of the whole class and is thus also meant to serve as collective feedback. The third set-up is a group peer-feedback managed through a learning management system. A lecture is afterwards turned into a collective teacher feedback on the revised assignments, which is the fourth feedback set-up. Finally, as a response to the students' requests for more feedback, two of the lecturers receive the groups in slots of 15 minutes for oral feedback on their assignments.

Zooming in

The feedback practice transpires in a practical landscape

In this perspective, we describe how people and objects are enmeshed in the practice. The peer-feedback takes place in front of the whole class in the workshops. We will follow the first workshop.

There are three lecturers and about 117 students of whom three times two students become protagonists. The participants do not know each other very well. Some of the students do not remember the names of the three lecturers, and according to Annie, it is possible that not all groups are necessarily in dialogue with a lecturer during the workshops. The lecturers, for their part, have not asked the students to wear name tags, which means that they know only few of the students' names. In the study groups, the students know each other. Yet, some students' attempts to make the whole class meet for a social event have come to nothing, as only very few show up.

The class meets in lecture theatres for the course lectures and in large, flat rooms for the workshops. For lack of flat rooms for classes of this size for this first workshop, the course has been assigned a room, too small and with poor acoustics. The students are asked to bring tables and chairs from a neighbouring class-room and take them back after the workshop. They sit very close, and the room is hot. The noise level is high when all the groups are working.

The announced peer-feedback session proceeds like this: One group is assigned to present its work so far, and another to provide feedback on what is presented. Thus, two students stand up to do the talking. This happens three times with students from different groups. They speak in a low voice and are not necessarily turned towards the whole class as they just stand up from where they are seated. It is difficult for students in the back to see them and even more difficult to hear them. Sometimes, it is also difficult for themselves to hear each other. A microphone is produced, but it is out of order. The feedback sessions take about 15 minutes, of

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which the assigned students talk for about 5. In the remaining time, a lecturer turns the feedback into a teaching sequence having one or two other students from the class answer questions. The lecturers speak in loud and clear voices. They make evaluative judgements and offer clear advice:

Correct, now you see it from the perspective of the organisation

Stay there! Qualify our suggestion! Good work! (Sylvia, co-lecturer)

The practice is framed within projects

In this perspective, we describe what we take to be the projects or the purposes of the practice. The lecturers' project in this set-up is to teach the students how to write a process reflection as that will be part of their examination paper. The methodology for it is to evaluate the process of some groups while the class is listening. At the same time, it is an activity that serves to break a three-hour group work. What they tell the class, however, is that this activity is teacher supported peer-feedback that will serve as an example for the rest of the class. The two students are thus important protagonists in the activity.

The feedback practice is shaped by practical understandings

In this perspective, we examine which practical understandings are called on or developed in the practice. What the feedback providers are expected to focus on (criteria) and what kind of comments they are expected to give (advice?) are not revealed. The providers are not at ease. Some make a few comments based on what their own group has done if they are lucky enough to be as far in the process as the group they talk to. They tend to omit criticism, turning instead to praise: 'That sounds good'. Their comments are thus few and weak, and the lecturers quickly take over.

From the examples that they are given about how other groups have proceeded and the lecturers' feedback to them, the class learns about various ways of proceeding, especially taking

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in the lecturers' reflections. Many of the groups point out how this influences their subsequent work, while others have difficulty relating what they hear to their own projects:

Feedback from the lecturers has made us change direction in our work.

We have learnt from the feedback the lecturers gave. They said "Stick to that", and that's what we are going to do.

It is from a presented example that we have learnt what a policy goal is.

The peer-feedback is, however, rated low:

I haven't learnt anything from the peer-feedback

We need a basis for giving feedback

The peer-feedback is too vague

The feedback practice is informed by general understandings

In this perspective, we look for general understandings that hold up the practice. The students think of feedback to be provided by someone more knowledgeable than themselves:

'It's what the lecturers say that matters.'

It doesn't work. They know as little as we do

The prioritising of the time in this peer-feedback set-up shows that the lecturers agree with them. Also, in my interview with Annie, I ask her what specific elements in the course she defines as feedback. She answers by listing the three set-ups where the lecturers are assigned to provide feedback. Only later, does she remember the two peer-feedback set-ups.

Among the students, it is generally understood to be within the norms of doing student to remain silent, however without judging those who speak up:

It's unpleasant to be asked in a cold call, because you may not have anything to say. It's humiliating to stand before hundred students without being able to say anything.

It's not because there is an ambiance for not speaking up – I like when people do it. It doesn't create a bad ambiance if you do.

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Evaluating others' work seems to be even more problematic, and there is some indication that students avoid doing so:

Not many want to say anything. Which means that you don't feel like ... and especially, you don't like to criticise others, although it's not necessarily negative.

You just don't feel like saying anything about others' work

Then the feedback becomes 'It sounds good'

Zooming out and analysis

Using Kemmis et al.'s practice ontology, I have identified the following likely constraints in my attempt to offer explanations for the student protagonists' weak engagement. There is clearly a discrepancy between the lecturers' project and their organisation of this learning activity since the student provider of feedback does not seem to be a necessary agent for making the students reflect on their processes. What manifests itself is teacher feedback, not surprisingly as this is how feedback is normally practiced in this course.

The enacted teacher feedback practice is held up by the *general understanding* that lecturers are competent evaluators of students' work and that students can learn from examples. The asymmetrical knowledge relation between the positions of teachers and students determines and is determined by a specific teacher feedback discourse consisting of judgements and explanations. The *doings* of the students are mainly those of receivers: Listening, processing information and possibly taking action. Surrounding and supporting this feedback practice enacted by the lecturers is the teaching practice in the course and on the programme. The main teaching method is lectures, the workshops being thought of as a supplement. The general idea of the teacher as provider and the students as receivers of information is furthermore embodied in the architecture and the furnishing of the learning spaces. This contributes to the perpetuation of the teaching practice: In the lecture halls the students' seats are turned towards the lecturer, the power point and the microphone. However, the same

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structure is also found in most of the classrooms for tutorials. While the furniture may be moved around, yet it has to be put back after the class.

Peer-feedback is a new feature in this course. It is not part of the students' practical understanding how to proceed or 'to go on', with Kemmis et al.'s words, whereas this is the case for the lecturers. They are so immersed in feedback practice that they are not even conscious of what they are doing: 'A template for what to say to them developed in my head (...) as I spoke', as Annie puts it in my interview with her.

Between the students, the knowledge relation is symmetrical, and they therefore need to get an idea of how this change of roles is supposed to make sense to them (*project*) and they also need clear instructions as to what the providers are expected to do (what *rules* to follow), which they do not get. With such a weak *discursive arrangement* they are left without a language other than that of co-lecturer Sylvia. The room for action (*material arrangement*) of the two protagonists is very small: Within few minutes and without getting time to think, one of them must account for the previous 45 minutes' work, and the other decide how to comment on it. The fact that the lecturers take over quickly may be felt as a relief, but probably prevents the students from realising that what goes on is peer-feedback, not least because there are no objects to support it like written guidelines or microphones. Providing feedback is a social act mediated by *power* and *solidarity*. Without clear guidelines and well-defined criteria, the providers are unsure whether being on the right track themselves and thus in risk of in risk of standing without legitimacy for exercising power. They therefore turn to solidarity and non-engagement instead – not least because they perform in a large intimidating social space.

To many, the class becomes a powerful judge of their performance and bodily appearance rather than a source of solidarity. The degree to which they are willing to engage under these conditions depends on the directionality and project of the practice as laid out by the lecturers, which, as we have seen, are not strong. A project of protecting themselves,

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however, is strongly felt and may explain the weak engagement, although this might result in a poorer learning outcome. The *social-political arrangements* constraining the students' engagements are thus also made by themselves. Their general understanding of *doing student* as a practice where they do not have to participate orally and definitely not judge their fellow students' work makes it difficult to organise student centred learning activities, including peer-feedback. Investigation the students' general study practice is thus likely to reveal similar projects concurring with the educational one and disturbing their directedness in learning practices proposed by their lecturers.

The architecture of the feedback practice in this course thus constrains rather than enables the engagement of the students in the actual peer-feed-back set-up. It includes structures and material object brought to the practice, but also the practice itself: The practitioners – lecturers and students – are carriers of a feedback practice that leaves only little room for the students to be active and engaged participants.

Discussion and perspectives

The aim of the present article is to discuss which theoretical apparatus to use when analysing formative feedback in order to understand why some students are reticent to engage with it. To achieve this purpose, main contributions on feedback and engagement with feedback have been consulted. The latter has pointed to the influence of context, a view that this article shares, albeit with a theoretically differently founded understanding of what context is and to what.

Four insights can be gained by understanding students' engagement with feedback as a phenomenon that can be explained by considering feedback as a social practice. First, it defines engagement as the degree to which students in their doings, sayings and relatings are directed towards the project of a feedback practice.

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Second, it implies a different conception of context that we have called arrangements. Context for engagement is not to be found around the individual student, but in and around the feedback practice that it determines by prefiguration. It enables and constrains the practice in a two-way traffic: The way students engage with feedback is determined by contextual elements like lecturers' discourse about and organisation of feedback or the space for the activity. However, the way in which the students carry out the feedback practice constitutes in itself a structure that enables and constrains the students' individual participation as well as the structures around them like the discourse, organisation and space for the activity.

Third, the example demonstrates that feedback practices cannot be said to be purely cognitive. They are bodily performances - in this case standing up, turning towards a public, speaking loudly and in a distinct voice – enabled and constrained by bodily abilities and materiality: Class and room size, furnishing, temperature and time-space. And they are also social performances: In the peer-feedback, they imply the willingness to play a role that is normally thought of as that of the teachers' in an assembly, neither receiver and the provider knowing whether there is solidarity to find. Engaging with feedback is always a social accomplishment too.

Fourth, when defining what enables student engagement with feedback, we must know about the specific practice: The projects, the practice landscape, as well as the practical and general understandings that hold up the practice. 'Thick' ontological descriptions (Geertz 1973) about one feedback practice must therefore inspire to critical thinking about other practices.

The practice theoretical approach gives rise to both theoretical, methodological and educational considerations. Feedback is by most people presumably understood as information about an assignment or an understanding. When we think it theoretically, we must, however, consider engagement with feedback as the only necessary element in the feedback process, as information only turns into feedback when students engage with it. Discourses about and

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organisations of feedback must, therefore, be understood as important contexts for engagement, but they are not the only elements in a practice architecture. As established by social constructivists like Nicol (2014) and Boud and Soler (2016) and in accordance with a practice theoretical view on learning as participation (Lave 2009), we must conceive engagement as both giving, receiving and acting on feedback.

Important methodological perspectives to feedback research are to change the unit of analysis from individual students to feedback practices. Understanding of the practices must be based on thorough descriptions of what can be observed in specific situations. These descriptions must be related to accounts of surrounding feedback and teaching practices in a movement of zooming in and zooming out in order to disclose a texture of interconnected practices (Nicolini 2009). The method illustrates how ontology becomes methodology in practice theory: It is by describing the feedback practice that constraints to engagement can be revealed. As discussed by Matusov (2007), the research of practices may pose problems of holism, because the heterogeneity and complexity of data make them less manageable. In my example, I have focused on one set-up, showing that the weakness of engagement was due to the power of the feedback practice of which it was a part. However, it was also determined by overlapping practices of which many more could have been included resulting in higher complexity and deeper insight.

The educational perspective is that changing educational practices such as that of feedback into more student-centred learning, is a comprehensive project. Social practices tend to be difficult to change because they are bundles of nexuses and bound to surrounding and neighbouring practices in determining networks. In the growing awareness of feedback as a practice that implies increased participation of peers together with a decrease in classic teacher feedback, a tool for understanding what conditions students' engagement is critical. A practice theoretical approach must be part of that toolbox.

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