'Trust is the lecturer's to lose':
Examining trust in the feedback dialogue

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Abstract

'Feedback trust' is an important, though often take-for-granted component of the feedback dialogue. If not maintained, it may be easily lost or broken, which may impact the effectiveness of feedback. In this paper, I unpack the notion of feedback trust by examining the factors that enable (or constrain) it, whether feedback trust is automatic, and whether feedback trust can be repaired. The paper is framed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) conceptualisation of trust. Qualitative data were collected from honours students in an Arts and Humanities Faculty at a South African university using questionnaires (n = 15) and interviews (n = 6); data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The results broadly indicate that there are three main factors that influence feedback trust: the feedback itself, the feedback giver, and the feedback community. In addition, the results show that feedback trust is to some degree automatic, as it is tied to the role of feedback giver, but that it may strengthen or weaken over time, depending on experience. Lastly, the results show that feedback trust can be repaired through communication, though it depends on how it was broken or lost. This paper argues that there are 'four Cs' necessary to build, maintain, and repair feedback trust between students and educators: comments, connection, communication, and care.

Keywords: academic relationships, feedback, feedback dialogue, feedback trust, honours students, trust

Introduction

This paper is in part inspired by my own journey as an educator. When I started tutoring in 2008, I had a brief moment of existential panic when I received my first batch of essays. I was overcome with the realisation that I was being trusted to grade essays, to give feedback to students that should help them, and that I would have to use my knowledge and understanding of the discipline to inform this process. But what if I wasn't good enough, smart enough, capable enough? What if I didn't know enough? At that point, I had not really received any training on giving feedback and grading essays, and I only had my own experience with feedback to guide

me, so, in that moment, it was a little overwhelming to be entrusted with what felt like someone's academic fate.

Since then, I have received training on how (not) to give feedback and I have become more confident in my feedback-giving abilities and in grading essays, but I continue to look for ways to improve and refine my feedback. Yet, I often still feel that weight of the implicit trust that is given to us as educators to do these things, especially as I now enter a supervisory role. This recently culminated in my deciding to do a project on the relationship between feedback and trust in higher education, which serendipitously overlapped with the 2024 Higher Education Close-Up (HECU) 11 Conference theme of 'trust'.

This paper starts with a broad overview of the nature of (written) feedback in higher education, with a particular emphasis on feedback in postgraduate contexts, and outlines the feedback dialogue. Thereafter, the notion of 'feedback trust' in the literature is discussed. The theoretical framework provides a conceptual understanding of the notion of 'trust' by drawing on the work of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000). The paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study which collected data from honours students at an Arts and Humanities Faculty at a South African university. Drawing on the results, the paper ultimately outlines the 'four Cs' that are necessary to build, maintain, and repair feedback trust in the feedback dialogue.

Literature review

Feedback is an important part of students' learning and development in higher education (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011), as it has various overlapping functions – ranging from identifying and correcting errors in student writing to enabling access to the disciplinary ways of knowing, being, and doing (Burke & Pieterick, 2010; Van Heerden, et al., 2017). Although feedback may be provided in different modes – such as in writing or verbally, individually, or in group settings – written feedback remains the dominant way of giving and receiving feedback (Black & McCormick, 2010). Written feedback is usually given on students' draft or final essays with the aim of enabling students to not only improve the written product, but also to develop their writing and their writer identities. The 'tangible' nature of written feedback – whether handwritten on hard copy assignments or provided electronically through tracked changes and comments – means that students often prefer it to other forms, as they are able to take it with them, refer back to it, and engage with it on a more practical level.

At undergraduate level, the effectiveness of written feedback is often impacted by the disjunction between large numbers of students, low numbers of staff, and short timeframes (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). As a result, written feedback to undergraduate students may take on an 'impersonal' and possibly even 'generic' nature, as educators may not necessarily know all their students that well – nor have the time to give detailed, individualised feedback. Moreover, undergraduate students may not have sufficient opportunity to engage with feedback meaningfully, as feedback is often only provided summatively (rather than formatively) at the end of the assessment process. As a result, undergraduate students may have limited opportunities to implement and learn from feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Carless & Boud, 2018). At

postgraduate level, the feedback landscape often changes quite significantly, as there are fewer students and supervisors may be able to get to know their students better on an individual level, and as a result may get to know their writing styles and challenges. Unlike undergraduate students, postgraduate students are also more likely to go through multiple rounds of feedback on the same assignment, giving them more opportunities to learn from their feedback (Chugh, et al., 2022; East, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2012). At postgraduate level, feedback may therefore more easily take on a dialogic approach (Van Heerden & Clarence, 2024).

Traditionally, a rather monologic view of feedback in higher education has prevailed; that is, that educators give feedback and students receive feedback. In recent years, there has been a move towards acknowledging and encouraging feedback as a dialogue – a two-way form of communication between student and educator, where both parties are equally active (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Boud & Molloy, 2013b; Carless, et al., 2011; Dawson, et al., 2019; Henderson, et al., 2019). Instead of being merely recipients of feedback, a dialogic view of feedback encourages students to actively seek and critically engage with feedback. Instead of merely providing students with a laundry list of errors, a dialogic view of feedback encourages educators to explain the errors, provide ways of avoiding them, and generally engage with their students in a conversational manner about their work (whether in person or in writing). This is often much easier at postgraduate level (Van Heerden & Clarence, 2024). Seeing feedback as a dialogue therefore embraces the relational aspect of feedback. As with any relational context, there needs to be some measure of trust. I will briefly examine feedback trust as it has been presented in the literature, before examining 'trust' as a theoretical framework for this study.

Feedback trust

Feedback trust is an important aspect of the feedback dialogue, as students may trust that educators will have the necessary expertise, experience, and good intention to provide them with helpful feedback, while educators may trust that students will come to them for guidance and understand and implement their feedback. In fact, Carless (2013: 91) argues that '[feedback] trust facilitates dialogic feedback'. In other words, because there is feedback trust between educators and students, there can be a feedback dialogue. Yet, given the fragile nature of trust, it may be easy for one or both of the parties to abuse feedback trust – students may lose trust in their educators if they perceive them to be indifferent, inexperienced, or insulting, while educators may lose trust in students who do not seem to take feedback to heart (Macfarlane, 2009; Rich, 2020). This may be exacerbated by interpersonal and relational challenges, especially given the relational nature of feedback (Bozalek, et al., 2016; Chong, 2018).

To date, feedback trust is relatively under-researched and there are only a handful of studies that explicitly examine it (Carless, 2009; 2013; Davis & Dargush, 2015; Troy, et al., 2024). For the most part, these studies highlight the importance of trust in the feedback context, with a particular emphasis on undergraduate studies. For example, Carless (2009; 2013) and Davis and Dargush (2015) highlight the importance of students and lecturers entering into a trusting relationship, especially given the relational nature of feedback. For students, this may mean that

they trust that an educator will give them helpful comments which they can implement, and that, should there not be a relationship of trust, they may disregard the feedback. Similarly, Troy et al. (2014) examine how a specific type of feedback, namely wise feedback, may be used to restore or sustain feedback trust, especially since students often already have a high level of trust in their educators when entering university. Although these studies all highlight the importance of trust in feedback, they do not explicitly examine the factors that might enable (or constrain) feedback trust at postgraduate level. This paper therefore aims to examine what specifically makes students trust (or distrust) educators' feedback.

Theoretical framework

The central theoretical concept that frames this paper is the idea of 'trust'. Although often seen as a nebulous concept, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) provide a useful, multidisciplinary definition to help frame the concept. Trust is generally understood to be 'one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open' (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 547). This enables us to view the relational aspect of the feedback dialogue, where students tend to be the vulnerable ones (the trusting) and educators the ones in whom confidence has been placed (the trusted).[1] The feedback process is generally understood to be fairly emotionally charged, as students have to navigate (usually negative) feelings of disappointment, fear, anxiety, and even shame, when receiving feedback. This places them in a vulnerable position in the feedback relationship, as, there is a (tacit) understanding that the feedback they receive will ultimately be helpful to them. At the same time, they risk possible disappointment if the feedback does not end up helping them or if it is misleading, thereby opening the possibility of risk and vulnerability in the feedback process (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Students' trust in their educators can be explained by the facets of trust that Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) describe. They indicate that trust in any relationship is predicated on five aspects, namely: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. These aspects can also be applied to the feedback relationship. Table 1 provides an overview of how the different facets of trust can play out in the feedback context.

In general, trust in higher education may be found between multiple parties; for example, between students and educators, students and students, educators and educators, educators and management, and students and the institution (Carless, 2009; Troy, et al., 2024). In each instance, there is a mutual necessity of trust; that is, that both parties need to acknowledge and trust in some sense of competence, honesty, and reliability in the other for the benefit of all (Bozalek, et al., 2016).

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[1] It can be argued that in the case of feedback, there is also an element of vulnerability for educators, in that they are also placing their confidence in students acting upon their feedback. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on students as the vulnerable parties.

Table 1 Facets of (feedback) trust

Facet of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, (2000)	Description	Feedback context
Benevolence	'[T]he confidence that one's well-being, or something one cares about, will be protected and not harmed by the trusted party' (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 557).	Students may trust that educators have their best interests at heart when giving feedback.
Reliability	'Reliability or dependability combines a sense of predictability with benevolence. In a situation of interdependence in which something is required from another person or group, the person or group can be counted on to supply it' (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 557).	In the feedback context, this means that students can trust that their educators will provide them with the feedback they need when it is needed.
Competence	This refers to having 'some level of skill [which] is involved in fulfilling an expectation' (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 557).	In the feedback context, this may refer to how students trust that their educators may have the necessary skills, expertise, knowledge, and/or experience to give feedback.
Honesty	This refers to 'truthfulness' being an aspect of trust, that information will not be distorted in any way. (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 558).	In feedback, this would refer to students trusting that the feedback they have been given is honest and not misleading (e.g. giving only praise when an essay needs lots of work would be an example of not giving honest feedback).
Openness	This aspect of trust refers to 'the extent to which relevant information is not withheld' (Tscannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000: 558).	In the feedback context, this would mean that students can trust that educators will provide them with the necessary information and clear communication they need in order to learn from feedback.

Though trust is important in higher education, it has not been the focus of much feedback-related research. Instead, in the literature, it is largely focused on in terms of assessment (that is, whether students trust that they are being assessed fairly) (see, for example, Dolan, et al., 2019; Fletcher, et al., 2012) or even in relation to the university itself (that is, whether students trust the university to provide quality education) (see, for example Carless, 2009; Law & Le, 2023). When

trust has been included in feedback-related research, it is usually in relation to peer feedback (that is, whether students trust their peers to give honest, reliable feedback) (see for example, De Lange & Wittek, 2022; Jongsma, et al., 2024;), rather than the practice of educators. Feedback trust, as conceptualised in Table 1 and in the literature review, is still relatively underexplored. As such, we now turn to the particulars of this study.

Method

As the aim of this study was to examine students' perceptions and experiences of feedback trust, a qualitative, mixed methods approach was taken. Data were collected via questionnaires and interviews with honours students in the Arts and Humanities Faculty at a South African university. The decision to focus on honours[2] students specifically was based on the fact that they occupy an interesting liminal space. Honours students have just moved out of the undergraduate space, where they have experienced three (or more) years of feedback as part of much larger groups, and where they have largely received feedback from tutors. Now they enter the postgraduate space, where feedback and academic relationships with lecturers and supervisors become more personal and familiar. The students who participated in this study, for example, were somewhat familiar with their supervisors, as they had been assigned to one for their research essay and engaged in rounds of feedback regarding their research topic. For many of them, their supervisors were also lecturers in the elective modules that make up their degree, where they would have received additional feedback from them. Thus, unlike, for example, first-year undergraduate students, these students are more familiar with their feedback givers.

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the university in question (HS23/10/10). To ensure that the principle of autonomy was upheld, participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that there would be no consequences should they not wish to continue participating in the study. To ensure that the principle of anonymity was upheld, all participants could provide a pseudonym. To further ensure anonymity, different pseudonyms were used for the questionnaire and the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, students were not asked to indicate which department in the faculty they were from; this also meant that students could be as honest as possible in their answers, without being concerned that their answers might be traced back to particular department or person.

Data was firstly collected via questionnaires, which were sent out electronically using Google Forms and consisted of a series of open-ended questions. The questionnaires were sent

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[2] In South Africa, an honours degree is 'a postgraduate specialisation qualification, characterised by the fact that it prepares students for research-based postgraduate study' (DHET, 2014: 34). It usually provides students with an opportunity to 'consolidate and deepen [their] expertise in a particular discipline' (DHET, 2014: 34), for example, BA Honours (Linguistics) or BSC Honours (Mathematics)). Honours degrees can only be taken upon the successful completion of an undergraduate degree, where the specialised subject was a one of the major subjects. Successful completion of an honours degree is usually a prerequisite for registering for a master's degree.

via email to all registered honours students in the relevant faculty. Notwithstanding frequent reminders, only 15 students completed the questionnaire. Despite the low number of responses, the actual responses provided a very detailed look into students' experiences with feedback and trust. Since the focus is on students' experiences and perspectives, and not on generalisability, the low response rate does not invalidate the results.

Data was secondly collected by means of interviews. Of the fifteen students who completed the questionnaires, six volunteered to take part in the interviews. These were conducted either in person or online, depending on the student's preference and/or availability. The interviews lasted between forty and sixty-five minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and had similar questions to the questionnaire, with the aim of giving students an opportunity to expand on what they said in the questionnaire. There were also questions that were 'unique' to the interview, which either emerged from the initial analysis of the questionnaire responses or from the participants' answers. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the following questions:

1. What makes students trust/mistrust feedback from educators?
2. Does feedback trust need to be earned or is it automatic?
3. Can feedback trust be repaired if trust has been broken or lost?

The first question was asked in both the questionnaires and the interviews, while the second and third questions were only focused on in the interviews.

Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021; 2022). This approach 'emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as analytic resource and their reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation' (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 330). As such, the emphasis is not on objectivity, but rather on the researcher's subjective engagement with the data to determine what 'story' it tells.

To start with the data analysis, all questionnaire responses were grouped according to the specific question in a Word document; the same was done with the interviews once the transcription process was completed. This enabled me to get a broad overview of what all the respondents were saying in relation to each question. Since question 1 was asked in both the questionnaire and the interviews, these responses were analysed together; while questions 2 and 3 were analysed individually, as these were only asked in the interviews.

Following Bruan and Clarke (2006; 2021), the first step of analysis was to familiarise myself with the data, which I did by re-reading both the questionnaire responses and the interview transcriptions and making initial notes. For the data coding stage, a semantic and latent approach was used: I not only focused on the actual words students used but also looked at what these words suggested. For example, the word 'knowledge' might suggest expertise or qualifications or experience. After this coding process, initial themes were generated. These were quite clunky and repetitive. These initial themes were refined through further review and development until

the final themes were articulated. The process of finalising the themes continued until after the conference itself. Finally, the themes were written up.

The following results and discussion section is organised according to the three questions listed above.

Results and discussion

Before continuing to answer the questions listed above, it's important to note that participants indicated that they do have feedback trust in their educators. Fourteen out of the fifteen questionnaire respondents indicated that they trust educators to provide useful and effective feedback, while one student indicated that they 'don't always' trust educators' feedback. This is similar to other studies which found that students do generally trust their educators' feedback (Davis & Dargush, 2015; Troy, et al., 2024). What was perhaps more interesting, were the reasons *why* they trusted educators' feedback. These will be discussed below.

What makes students trust/mistrust feedback from educators?

The reasons presented show the slightly blurred lines between trust and mistrust in the feedback dialogue. Every reason that is presented as a reason to trust educators' feedback can also be a reason why that feedback is lost or broken. Although I am presenting the reasons for trusting/mistrusting feedback as separate themes, they do interlink and overlap to some degree.

Feedback: Extensive and experience

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the dominant themes that emerged from the questionnaires was the importance of the actual feedback in engendering feedback trust. In particular, participants indicated that the clarity and level of detail given in feedback played a role in whether they trusted educators' feedback. For example, when asked what would make them trust feedback, students wrote:

> *If the feedback consists of explanations of where I went wrong or what I missed. Writing 'no', 'wrong' or 'relevance??' without any sort of explanation of what I could have said or resources I could have sued, is useless. All I'm thinking is 'my work sucks and I'm stupid'. (Ivy)*

> *[H]ow they present the feedback ... specificity as much as possible, support towards the right direction. (Lumo)*

> *If they provide reasons for their comments, for instance, they explain why I lost certain marks or why I gained them. (Poppy)*

> *I trust my supervisor, yes. He gives very thorough feedback. I have had one lecturer who gave me no form of feedback (only a mark/grade). I find that deeply disappointing because I have no way of knowing if the lecturer actually engaged with my work. (Pauline)*

In all of these quotes, the respondents emphasise the importance of feedback being detailed enough for them to understand what went wrong and, by implication, what they can do better next time. These responses therefore speak to the importance of 'feedforward' – that is, that feedback does not just tell students what they did wrong, but also explains why they went wrong and how they can do better in future assignments (Duncan, 2007). This is an important aspect of the feedback dialogue and emphasises the value that students place on thorough, effective feedback.

Relatedly, students' trust in feedback was also tied to their previous feedback experiences and the perceived value that feedback brought. For example:

> *If they have given me feedback already and the result was good [then] I would definitely go back to them for more feedback. (Ash)*

> *Yes [I trust educators], I haven't had an experience where they had led me astray. (Stan, questionnaire)*

> *Personally, I would listen to any feedback that I receive, but whether I take it to heart or discard it will depend on how beneficial I feel or think it to be. (Suzie)*

> *It would depend on … my judgment on whatever they are saying. (Floyd)*

Similarly, Belle indicated that 'hav[ing] a record of giving bad feedback' would make her not trust feedback.

It is interesting to note from these responses that there is an element of using their own discretion as to what may be considered 'useful' feedback and thus trustworthy (see, for example, Suzie and Floyd's responses); that is, if they do not perceive it to be of benefit, they do not necessarily trust the feedback. This perhaps points to the subjective nature of the perceived value of feedback and that students might feel that feedback is more or less useful than their educators do (Carless, 2006). At the same time, this does seem to tie in with Ash, Stan, and Belle's assertions that past feedback experiences shape the perceived trustworthiness of educators' feedback; that is, if someone's feedback has proven to be useful in the past, then they are more likely to trust their feedback (Bozalek, et al., 2016).

Overall, these responses indicate the importance of educators providing feedback that is useful, detailed, and clear in order for feedback trust to be developed (Macfarlane, 2009). It therefore stands to reason that if students receive feedback that is vague, unhelpful, or

insufficient, they would be less likely to trust educators' feedback. Feedback experiences, therefore, seem to be crucial in shaping the degree of students' feedback (mis)trust.

Feedback giver: Qualifications and expertise
A number of few respondents indicated that what would cause them to trust feedback was the person providing the feedback. Most of the respondents felt that if someone was in a position to give feedback, then their feedback should be trustworthy. For example, participants highlighted the importance of educators' experience, knowledge, and even qualifications in determining the level of trust they have in their feedback:

> *[T]hey are more experienced in the academic field than I am and also have higher qualifications than I do; so I suppose I just automatically trust that they have better judgement than me. (Belle)*

> *[They] have been in my place before, so they carry knowledge of how to do things and how not to. They have experience and valuable insights. (Poppy)*

> *Knowing that the person has the ability to understand my work and give positive critique on my flaws to help me do my work better. Knowing that the person has the necessary knowledge on the topic discussed and years of experience in that particular field. (Mo)*

Trust in the experience and qualifications of the educators was therefore seen to be a strong indicator of feedback trust (Chong, 2018). In as much as respondents indicated that they do trust educators who are in the role of feedback giver to give effective feedback, they also indicated that there was a 'hierarchy' of trust. That is, some educators were seen as more trustworthy than others (in this case, supervisors and lecturers), while tutors[3] were seen as 'less trustworthy'. For example:

> *I do trust my supervisor and lecturers to provide effective feedback. With regards to tutors it's very hit or miss. Some tutors I could tell take pride in their work, whereas others are just there for sake of the incentive. (Bob)*

> *I feel as though my entire department only wants me to succeed. But though undergrad I did not trust the one department's tutors and as a result did not want to work with that dept at a postgrad level. (Erin)*

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[3] Even though, as honours students, they were no longer receiving feedback from tutors, I nevertheless included tutors as an option, as until their honours year, tutors may have been the main source of written feedback.

It was a lot easier to kind of disregard the tutors feedback, but if a lecturer said this was like wrong or this didn't work, I like took that to heart. (Megan)

I feel I would trust the lecturer and supervisor a bit more; tutors are still in the first stages of teaching. Lecturers, they've been there for years and then supervisors they were appointed as a supervisor because, you know, they have been in that field, so they will know what they're speaking about. (Coco)

This makes sense: tutors are often not much older than students and they may not yet have much experience in either facilitating tutorials or providing feedback (Abbot, Graf & Chatfield, 2018; Faroa, 2017). The perceived level of experience of tutors may therefore cause students to be slightly mistrustful towards their feedback, especially, as Bob highlighted, it seems as though they are only there to get paid. Yet, there was still a measure of trust in tutors, as Inez pointed out: 'because they know more than me … and it's one of their responsibilities to help me get to where they are'. In addition, students generally only receive feedback from tutors during their undergraduate years where there may be limited opportunities to engage with the feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013a), which can also impact the perceived trustworthiness of tutors as feedback-givers.

Overall, then, there is a sense that people who are in a position to give feedback – whether tutors, lecturers, or students – do at least have some 'right' to do so, whether by seniority (even if only by a couple of years, as in the case of tutors), experience, or qualifications (Fong, et al., 2018). The feedback giver is thus seen to be worthy of feedback trust precisely because they are the feedback giver.

Academic relationships: Connection, communication, engagement, and empathy

By far, the largest indicator of feedback trust for the respondents related to the importance of establishing a sense of being in an academic relationship with their educators (Dingel & Punti, 2023; Tormey, 2021). Students who feel like they can reach out to their educators may better navigate the demands of higher education, including engaging with and learning from feedback (Leenknecht, et al., 2023; Middleton, et al., 2023). In the study, interpersonal and relational aspects such as connection, communication, engagement, and empathy were highlighted as important for engendering feedback trust. For example, respondents indicated that having a sense of connection with their educators – that is, getting to know them outside of their roles as lecturers, tutors, and supervisors – increased the likelihood of mutual trust. Respondents felt that they could be trusted to engage with and learn from feedback if educators knew them, but also that educators could be trusted if students knew them, as can be seen from Megan's comment:

Building that relationship, I think is like really integral to like both parties … If I had no idea who my lecturers were, and I feel like they had no idea who I was, then asking for feedback … It kind of feels like you're asking someone on a blind date or something … I tell the

second years I'm tutoring 'get your lecturers to know your names because then when you need something, you're a human, a person, and they can put a face to a name and if something goes wrong, they know who you are' ... Your lecturer recognising you on a personal level, even though it's not like a personal like relationship, just makes it so much more easier to approach [them]... [It allows you to see] 'oh, you were a student too at one point, like you were where I am' ... and I think that like built that trust. (Megan)

Having a good relationship with an educator is important for building trust in general, and feedback trust in particular (Tormey, 2021). Moreover, a sense of trust in the educator may elicit feelings of safety that will better enable students to engage with learning (McKay & Macomber, 2023; Tormey, 2021;). As a result, students who are more 'connected' with their educator are more likely to pay attention to feedback, and even 'negative comments' may be easier to digest if they know the person who is giving the feedback (Davis & Dargush, 2015; Fong, et al., 2018).

Key to establishing this connection is communication. Students indicated that much in the same way that they are required to be open and transparent with educators, for example, about missing deadlines or unforeseen circumstances, they would appreciate it if educators paid them the same courtesy. Keeping communication lines open between students and educators meant that students trusted their educators more. For example, Michelle recounted an incident where a lecturer informed students that they would be late with feedback and the small act of acknowledgement increased Michelle's trust in the lecturer.

Trust is a respect of time and communication ... Saying 'I know I'm running late' on the feedback ... instils a sense of trust because you're aware of the fact that I need something to be able to improve on something. (Michelle)

Similarly, Jacob, who was experiencing trouble with a supervisor who had stopped responding to his emails, highlighted that 'keeping on top of the communication ... even if it's like within five days or whatever' was especially important in maintaining feedback trust. Research has shown that communication is key for building academic relationships (Dingel & Punti, 2023; Middleton, et al., 2023), and it stands to reason that it would be as important for establishing and maintaining trust in the feedback process.

For many of the respondents, like Jacob, underlying communication was a sense of acknowledgement, of being seen as 'human'. Empathy therefore emerged as a very strong factor for enabling or constraining feedback trust. For example:

Empathy ... is a basic lens to productivity and transformation ... It has the power to uplift, inspire, grab necessary attention, while allowing space to take criticism. (Lumo)

Is it necessary for you to be this mean or this abrasive with your feedback? ... You wouldn't like that as a junior postgrad and you wouldn't like that from your supervisor ... You should

be gentle, especially I think for Honours students because it's our first time doing postgrad and maybe most lecturers forget that we're still students, we're kind of babies in the postgrad feedback. So yeah, with supervisors, especially one-on-one, be kind, gentle but like not too gentle. (Inez)

They maybe forget somehow that the student is like maybe actually also a person … Or maybe they forget their experience as a student once upon a time. (Coco)

Just be kind … Lecturers don't have to treat students like their children … But there has to be empathy … Be academic kind. (Michelle)

Empathy has increasingly been recognised as vital for student engagement and success; yet it is not often obvious in the academic context (Zhou, 2022). For the participants, the importance of having (visible) empathy in establishing feedback trust highlights the element of care that is deeply embedded in feedback dialogues (Bozalek, et al., 2016). Without (perceived) care through an acknowledgement of the other, feedback trust may be lost or broken. For these respondents, receiving feedback that shows an awareness of their experiences was therefore important for developing feedback trust.

Relatedly, respondents also indicated that they felt that feedback trust was easier to develop when there was sufficient engagement with and interest in their work. For example, when asked what would make them trust feedback, respondents indicated:

If a supervisor takes genuine interest in your work. (Jacob)

When I can tell that the lecturer or the marker has engaged with my work. (Michelle)

Will they show interest in my work or do they see my work as just you know, ag, another student's work? (Coco)

Educators who seem as though they are doing a rushed or cursory job of giving feedback did not seem to be trustworthy to the respondents. The combined aspects of connection, communication, empathy, and engagement therefore point to the strong relational component in developing and maintaining feedback trust. This is reflected in the work of Dison and Collett (2023) and Dison, et al. (2022), who found that foregrounding relational aspects during online and hybrid feedback contexts may better enable a sense of belonging and community for students, which may ultimately be more effective for student success.

These overall themes speak to the various aspects of trust, namely: honesty (related to the detail of feedback); competence and reliability (related to the feedback giver); benevolence (related to the overall intention of feedback); and openness (related to the importance of communication) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). One aspect of trust that could be added in

the context of feedback is the importance of connection; that is, that it is a sense of connection (or community) with another is needed to build a relationship of trust.

Is feedback trust 'automatic' or does it need to be earned?

From the section above, it is clear then that there is some feedback trust between students and educators. I now turn to looking at whether this feedback trust is 'automatic' or whether it needs to be earned. The answer to this is complicated. The interview respondents indicated that there is some degree of implicit feedback trust in the *role* of the feedback giver; that is, if someone has been appointed or assigned to give feedback as a tutor, lecturer, or supervisor, then students assume that person is competent and capable enough to do so. For example,

> *I think there does or should exist some measure of trust between the person giving the feedback and the recipient. I do not hold any feedback as valid, significant, or trustworthy from anyone who lacks experience, expertise, credibility and insight on the specific field, area or subject where feedback is required. (Austen)*

> *You should trust or believe that your supervisor or tutor or lecturer is giving you honest feedback … Especially because they've been in the field longer than you have. (Inez)*

However, the degree of trust is influenced by the person who inhabits that role; that is, who the tutor, the lecturer, or the supervisor is. Respondents indicated that the more they get to know an educator and the more they engage with their feedback, teaching style, and level of investment in the student, the more (or less) they trust that educator. For example:

> *I think that it is earned through relationship building and through giving good feedback. It isn't instantaneous. (Megan)*

> *I think it's something that's automatic until you as the lecturer, until you give me something that makes me doubt whether I can trust you … feedback trust is automatic and then the trust is the lecturer's to lose. (Michelle).*

Feedback trust therefore needs to be earned through feedback experiences, forming relationships, and clear communication. What also became apparent from these findings is that feedback trust is not static; instead, it may be quite fluid. Students, for instance, may implicitly trust a tutor simply because they are a tutor, but over time trust them more or less. For example:

> *So you trust someone at the beginning, but then as time goes on, you start, you know maybe doubting here and there, or even the other way around. (Coco)*

Similarly, Jacob, indicated that his feedback trust in his supervisor was low because he has not heard from them in a month. He admitted that if he had been asked the same question a month ago, he would have said he implicitly trusted his supervisor, and that were I to ask him a month later, he might trust the supervisor more or even less, depending on whether communication was re-established.

Overall, then, it seems as though feedback trust is to some degree 'implicit' (Hattie, 2009), which ties back to the importance of (perceived) competence in establishing a relationship of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). However, feedback trust also needs to be earned through feedback experiences, forming relationships, and clear communication, which suggests the importance of reliability and openness (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Feedback trust is also not static, and once earned, it needs to be maintained, or it may weaken over time. Instead of seeing feedback trust as a continuum, with 'trust lost' and 'trust earned' on either side, it is more of a pendulum, and the degree of trust is largely influenced by students' experiences (feedback, relational, etc.) with their educators. Feedback trust, then, needs to be built on the implicit feedback trust embedded in the feedback-giver role, needs to be maintained, and is subject to change.

Can feedback trust be repaired?

The interview respondents were all in agreement that feedback trust is something that could be broken or lost. Whether feedback trust can be repaired depends greatly on the way in which it was broken, but one way of repairing it is through communication. For example, Megan highlights that:

> [It] depends on the situation … if it's [caused] by miscommunication … because you took something to heart and that person took something to heart and now there's tension, I think that can be worked out through communication.

Coco, similarly, highlights the importance of communication to iron out feedback trust issues; in her case, she momentarily lost trust in her tutor's marking when she received feedback and grades that were much different than usual. She approached the lecturer and feedback trust was restored through communication.

> I understood his side. And you know, I tried better … and the good marks came back, so I was like 'okay, so I shouldn't you know get angry or anything like that because he marked well all the time, so this time there obviously has to be a reason … sometimes communication is also important.

Austen received feedback which left her 'squashed like a bug'. In this instance, it was *because* she trusted the lecturer that she "believed" the lecturer's harsh comment and why it had such a profound impact on her. The feedback that Austen received made her give up on her dream

career, and instead, she pivoted to something else. This experience made her lose trust in the feedback giver, as the feedback was not helpful, only harmful. Austen initially felt that trust could not be restored, but then later indicated that:

> *[T]his is a two-way thing … there needs to be communication; there needs to be the willingness to want to engage and work on this thing. Otherwise, there is no cause for building trust.*

For the respondents in this study, then, feedback trust is something that can be repaired through communication, unless there is a serious breach of trust in the relationship itself (such as divulging personal information or speaking negatively about the student and/or their research). Here we see the facets of openness (through communication) and benevolence (through intention) as playing a role in repairing feedback trust.

The four Cs of building, maintaining, and repairing feedback trust

Overall, what emerges from these findings is that there are four Cs necessary to build, maintain, and repair feedback trust, namely: comments, connection, communication, and care. These overlap with the five aspects of trust identified by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000). Table 2 provides an overview of the overlap between the four Cs and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) five aspects of trust.

Table 2: Facets for building, maintaining, and repairing feedback trust

Four Cs of feedback trust	Facet of trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000)	Feedback context
Comments	Honesty	This emphasises the importance of giving and receiving feedback that convey honest messages about how to improve, learn from, and engage with the feedback.
Connection	Reliability, competence	This emphasises the importance of the student-educator relationship to establish that the educator gives reliable and competence feedback.
Communication	Openness	This emphasises the importance of open communication during the feedback dialogue (by both parties), regarding any aspect that may impact the feedback process.
Care	Benevolence	This emphasises the importance of taking a care-full approach to feedback; that is, that the student perceives feedback to be to their benefit and not harmful in anyway.

Firstly, the actual feedback comments, specifically the degree of detail, perceived usefulness, and level of engagement, are important for feedback trust. It is through the feedback

that students receive, and their feedback experiences with and outcomes of that feedback, that they come to have deeper trust in educators' feedback. This shows the aspect of honesty (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000); that is, students work with the assumption that the feedback comments that they receive is given to them with the aim of improving their work and not to mislead them in any way.

Secondly, there needs to be a connection**,** an academic relationship between students and educators where students can build feedback trust in the person who is giving the feedback (not just the role). Academic relationships have been shown to be important for student success, as students who connect with their educators are more likely to engage with feedback, accept it (even if 'negative'), and may have more confidence to consult with their educators if they do not understand it. Having a relationship with the feedback giver therefore increases the effectiveness and reciprocity of the feedback dialogue (Chong, 2018; Davis & Dargush, 2015; Fong, et al., 2018). Moreover, if students are connected with the person giving the feedback, they are also more likely to feel that the person has the capacity and skill to do so, which further increases the likelihood of learning from and engaging with their feedback (Dison & Collett, 2023; Dison, et al., 2022. This shows the importance of reliability in, and the perceived competence of, the feedback giver (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Thirdly, communication is key throughout the feedback dialogue, whether it is in establishing a relationship, keeping students informed of delays in feedback, or trying to repair broken trust. Communication also ties in with connection: the more communication takes place between parties in the feedback dialogue, the stronger the connection will be – and the stronger the connection is, the easier it is to communicate freely (Dingel & Puti, 2023). Communication therefore relates to the trust aspect of openness (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). If educators and students are open with one another – if they are able to communicate more freely and frequently – then it may better enable the development, maintenance, and repair of feedback trust.

Lastly, care**,** and particularly empathy, is important in informing how comments are given (constructive rather than critique), how the connection is made (acknowledging one another as people), and communication (keeping communication lines open) (Bozalek, et al., 2016). This shows the importance of benevolence **i**n trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000); that is, that students perceive that feedback is being given not to harm them, but to help them.

Conclusion

This paper examined 'feedback trust' in the feedback dialogue. Drawing on qualitative data collected from honours students, it was found that there are three main factors that can enable (or constrain) feedback trust, namely: the feedback itself; the feedback giver; and interpersonal and relational aspects, such as connection, communication, empathy, and engagement. Feedback trust was found to be implicitly linked to the role of the feedback giver, but the strength of it was determined by the person inhabiting that role. Feedback trust could be repaired if broken through communication, but only if the relationship between student and educator was

strong and/or intact. In order to build, maintain, and repair feedback trust, four Cs were recommended: comments, connection, communication, and care.

This paper has implications for written feedback practices, especially in postgraduate contexts where it might be easier to foster a feedback dialogue with students (Van Heerden & Clarence, 2024). Educators need to be aware of the impact that feedback may have on students (as in Austen and Jacob's cases), and how it may impact their confidence and even their career choices. Feedback trust is important for the feedback dialogue and because it is to some degree 'implicit' in the student-educator relationship, it may be easy to unintentionally 'abuse' that trust. It is important, therefore, that educators build on this 'implicit' trust to provide students with a positive feedback environment in which they can thrive and succeed. Giving feedback, therefore, requires a degree of emotional awareness, empathy, and care, which may add another layer of complexity to written feedback.

Author biography

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