The Relationship between Performance Feedback and Service-Learning

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Performance feedback plays a key role in helping service-learning students adapt to their service environment. In this paper, the role played by feedback in promoting key service-learning goals is examined. 177 students who were enrolled in service-learning classes at six colleges and universities in the Midwest completed surveys reporting the quality of feedback they received in their workplace, their personal dispositions toward feedback, and the extent to which their key service-learning goals were attained. Evidence was found supporting the proposition that both the quality of feedback in the service setting, and students’ own dispositions to approach or avoid feedback, positively predict the attainment of service-learning goals. Implications for service-learning practice and future research are discussed.

Performance Feedback and Service-Learning

Rooted in the civics education tradition in American schools (Hepburn, 1997), service-learning is receiving interest from academicians in higher education interested in applying curricular models that are experience-based (Gabelnick, 1997) and socially responsive (Altman, 1996). There is evidence that effective service-learning programs lead to such beneficial outcomes as increases in students’ self-esteem (Eyler & Giles, 1997), systemic and complex moral reasoning (Eyler, Root, & Giles, 1998), development of productive interpersonal relationships with adults (McGill, 1992), and commitment to help others (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Moreover, service-learning experiences help students face the reality of working with other adults on problems encountered in the community. These experiences could, therefore, be valuable in building competencies to work effectively with co-workers and customers (Stone & Mortimer, 1998) and making career choices (Owens, 1982). Also, service-learning programs, like internships, could help in crystallizing students’ vocational self-concepts (Hall, 1976), thereby easing their transition from school to work (Kramer, 1974), and allowing them access to potential employers.

Performance feedback has been described as a developmental tool for students participating in service-learning (Menlo, 1993), and has been treated as a principle of good practice in the service-learning literature (Honnett & Poulson, 1989). Feedback in the work setting could potentially impact students involved in service-learning in at least three ways.

1. Adaptation. There is evidence that feedback facilitates individual adaptation in the workplace (Ashford, 1986). Feedback forms a significant part of an organization’s information environment (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978), providing people with information regarding performance standards, rules, and norms, as well as the extent to which these are being met or not met. This helps people develop strategies to attain desired goals and other workplace standards, and ultimately leads to successful adaptation.

2. Insight. According to the experiential learning perspective (Dewey, 1938; Lewin, 1951; Marsick, 1991), performance feedback can help people gain insight into their own values, beliefs, and assumptions about people and work, especially if their experiences are processed through reflection (Marsick, 1989). Similarly, 360-degree feedback research suggests that feedback can help enhance people’s awareness about their competencies, thus facilitating personal change and development (Yammarino & Atwater, 1997).

3. Self-Efficacy. Performance feedback available to individuals through enactive mastery and verbal persuasion have been shown to enhance self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Higher levels of self-efficacy might lead individuals to set more challenging goals and attempt more complex strategies to achieve goals, and increase the probability of successfully attaining these goals. In the service-learning context, self-efficacy would be translated into better student performance, as well as higher student confidence in addressing community problems and choosing challenging careers.

Although the positive impact of feedback on performance in training programs has been demonstrated in various studies (e.g., Martocchio & Dulebohn, 1994; Martocchio & Webster, 1992), little is known about how performance feedback specifically
impacts the way in which people learn from their experiences in the natural context of their workplace. Studies of feedback and training performance cannot be easily generalized to the realm of experiential learning in the workplace because of the unstructured and often random characteristics of such learning (Marsick, 1990), and because what is learned may or may not be directly translated into changes in objective performance. On the other hand, this type of learning is extremely common and has implications for the individual’s adaptation to the work environment and to self-development. This study attempts to bridge this gap in literature by relating performance feedback to learning, specifically in community service settings.

Students participating in service-learning programs might not have much access to high quality performance feedback. Community service agencies typically do not have established mechanisms for appraising and providing feedback to their “volunteer” workers (Clifton, 1993). Students, therefore, may need to proactively seek and utilize feedback in order to improve their performance and to learn more. Evidence exists, in fact, that people are motivated to seek feedback in order to reduce the uncertainty resulting from the ambiguity and complexity in organizational settings and to increase mastery of their environment (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). On the other hand, feedback-seeking has costs, such as threat to one’s self-esteem, potential loss of face (one is perceived as being uncertain if one seeks feedback), and the requirement of extra physical and psychological effort in feedback-seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). It can be inferred from the above that in community service settings, students would tend to balance the contrasting desires to seek and avoid feedback, and that there would exist individual differences in student dispositions to seek and use feedback.

Individual Differences in Feedback Seeking and Use

There is evidence that differences in predispositions can determine the extent to which people seek and utilize feedback (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). For instance, individual differences in goal orientation predict feedback-seeking. The value of seeking feedback exceeds the costs for people who have a learning goal orientation, i.e., those who seek to develop competence by acquiring new skills and mastering new situations. In contrast, the costs of feedback-seeking exceed its value for people who have a performance goal orientation, i.e., those who have a tendency to demonstrate and validate their competence and avoid negative judgments about their competence (VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). In unstructured settings, people are likely to find few external stimuli (such as goals, reinforcement contingencies, and supervision) to guide their behavior and are likely to be influenced more by their dispositional goal orientation (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, in press). Although others (e.g., Herold, Parsons, & Rensvold, 1996) have described the propensity to seek/avoid feedback as an important individual-difference variable in organizations, it is unclear from the literature whether this variable is predicted by a broader trait. I suggest that dispositional goal orientation will predict feedback disposition. It should be noted, however, that goal orientation can predict student learning from community service independent of feedback disposition because, besides feedback, other self-regulating mechanisms such as goal-setting and planning are likely to play a role in mediating this relationship (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum).

Performance Feedback in the Community Setting

The amount and quality of feedback available to students in the community setting could be another predictor of student learning from community service. People receive feedback from their environment by both monitoring the environment for relevant feedback cues and by proactively seeking feedback from relevant sources (Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1993). Not all feedback is useful, however. Herold, Liden, & Leatherwood (1987) found that feedback quality—obtained by multiplying feedback amount, usefulness, and consistency—varies depending on the source of feedback. For instance, supervisory feedback is perceived by workers as being of lower quality than the feedback obtained by performing the task itself, probably because supervisors are perceived as being psychologically distant, with inadequate opportunity to observe and understand worker performance. Moreover, different sources are able to observe and provide feedback regarding different aspects of behavior. This, and research from 360-degree feedback literature (e.g., Church & Bracken, 1997), suggest the importance of considering multiple feedback sources, such as clients and coworkers along with supervisors, while studying the impact of performance feedback on service-learning. Service recipients, i.e., people who receive the service provided by the student, would have an opportunity to observe relevant behaviors and evaluate student performance, because in service-learning settings there is often considerable one-to-one interaction between students and service recipients. Students usually have access to the clients’ verbal and non-verbal reactions to the ser-
vice, see the changes brought about in the client due to the service, and can proactively seek feedback from the clients. Similarly, coworkers could serve as informal coaches and mentors for the student.

**Hypothesis**

In this study, I looked at the relationship among the available-usable performance feedback or feedback quality in the community service agency, students’ propensity to seek/avoid performance feedback, and student perceptions regarding their learning from community service. A conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. According to this model, students with a learning goal orientation will tend to have a positive disposition or an “approach” orientation toward feedback. Students with a performance goal orientation, on the other hand, will be disposed to avoid seeking and utilizing feedback. Feedback approach will positively predict feedback-seeking, while feedback avoidance will negatively predict feedback-seeking. Goal orientation will also predict student learning from community service independently of feedback disposition. Finally, feedback-seeking and feedback quality, i.e., the amount of usable performance feedback available to the student from the organization (supervisors, coworkers, and clients), together will positively predict student learning from community service.

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 177 undergraduate students enrolled in ten classes in three liberal arts colleges and three mid-size universities in the Midwest. Students were enrolled in classes taught in the humanities or social sciences, e.g., sociology/anthropology, technical writing, gerontology, and religion. All classes required students to engage in service-learning, and typically involved a full semester commitment from the students. The amount of service ranged from 10 hours (religion) to between 30-60 (all other courses). Sample work settings were, schools, hospitals, and social action agencies in the community. Students were supervised by an agency supervisor.

**Measures**

Four instruments were used in this study (Appendix A contains the items from the first three instruments).

1. **Student Learning from Community Service Instrument.** This instrument, designed by the author, assesses a service-learner’s perceived effectiveness in meeting service-learning goals. It consists of 10 items which were developed to tap the multiple learning goals of service-learning programs (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1997; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996).

   Exploratory factor analysis of participant responses using the principal components analysis method with orthogonal (varimax, with eigen value $\geq 1$) rotation revealed a one-factor solution. This factor accounted for about 56% of the total variance in subject responses. Coefficient alpha for this instrument was .91.

2. **Feedback Disposition Instrument.** This instrument, designed by the author, measures student propensity to seek/avoid feedback. Exploratory factor analysis of participant responses to items in this instrument using the principal components analysis method with orthogonal (varimax, with eigen value $\geq 1$) rotation revealed a two-factor solution. These factors together accounted for 68% of the total variance in subject responses. Factor 1 consisted of items 1,2,5, which reflected “feedback avoidance.”
Factor 2 consisted of items 3,4,6,7 that reflected “feedback approach.” The 2 sets of items were treated as 2 separate scales. Coefficient alphas for both the scales were .68.

3. **Goal Orientation Instrument.** This instrument was adapted from VandeWalle (1997). Exploratory factor analysis of participant responses to items in this instrument using the principal components analysis method with orthogonal (varimax, with eigen value =/> 1) rotation revealed a two-factor solution. These factors accounted for about 61% of the total variance in subject responses. Factor 1 (items 1,3,4) was labeled “learning goal orientation,” and factor 2 (items 2,4,6) was labeled “performance goal orientation.” Coefficient alphas for the learning goal orientation scale and performance goal orientation scale were .83 and .60 respectively.

4. **Agency Feedback Instrument.** This instrument consisted of three sets of items. Item set 1 measured the amount of feedback that was available but not solicited from the subject’s supervisors, coworkers, and clients. Item set 2 measured the amount of feedback-seeking by the subject from the same three sources. Item set 3 measured the amount of feedback obtained from the same three sources which was considered useful by the subject. Exploratory factor analysis of participant responses to items in this instrument using the principal components analysis method with orthogonal (varimax, with eigen value =/> 1) rotation revealed a three-factor solution. These factors accounted for about 72% of the total variance in subject responses. Factors accounted for about 61% of the total variance in subject responses. Factor 1 (items 1,3,4) was labeled “learning goal orientation,” and factor 2 (items 2,4,6) was labeled “performance goal orientation.” Coefficient alphas for the learning goal orientation scale and performance goal orientation scale were .83 and .60 respectively.

5. **Procedure**

Service-learning coordinators were contacted at three universities and three colleges in the Midwest. These coordinators supplied names and contact information for instructors involving their students in service-learning. Two criteria were used to select 10 classes for the study: (1) students were involved in service-learning, not volunteering [community service was integrated with class content and grading, and students participated in reflection (presentations, journals, and discussions)]; and (2) students had supervisors, coworkers, and clients.

All four survey instruments were administered to students during class time. The author personally administered the surveys to students in 7 classes (around 115 students), and instructors administered the remainder of the surveys. The purpose of the study was explained to students, and every effort was made to assure anonymity. For example, completed surveys were not collected from individual students; they were placed together in a carton or on a separate table by students, and were put together as

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**TABLE 1**

*Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Coefficient Alphas for Key Variables (N=177).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Coworker Feedback Quality</td>
<td>11.72</td>
<td>6.71</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Supervisor Feedback Quality</td>
<td>12.88</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>.55</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Client Feedback Quality</td>
<td>12.69</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.29</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Organizational Feedback Quality</td>
<td>12.30</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Feedback Seeking</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Feedback Disposition – Avoid</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Learning Goal Orientation</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Performance Goal Orientation</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. INDEX (Mean of SLCS Items)</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Chronbach’s alpha values are reported in bold on the diagonal. Correlations ≥1.22 are significant at p < .01, correlations ≥1.15 are significant at p < .05.
a set into an envelope by the instructor, who was careful not to look at student responses.

Analysis

I tested a path-analysis model based on the conceptual model. Analysis was carried out using AMOS 3.6 (Arbuckle, 1997).

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order bivariate correlations between variables examined in this study are presented in Table 1. An index measuring student learning from community service (SLCS) was obtained by computing the mean of the 10 items used in the first instrument. Similarly, an index of organizational feedback quality was obtained by computing the mean of coworker feedback quality and supervisor feedback quality. As mentioned before, supervisor, coworker and client feedback quality variables were computed by multiplying feedback availability and feedback use items for each of the three feedback sources. The resultant values for feedback quality variables could, therefore, range from 1 (low) to 25 (high). Feedback-seeking was measured on a five-point scale, and all other variables were measured on nine-point scales. All correlations were in the hypothesized direction. Feedback-seeking seems to be the lone exception because it is significantly correlated with feedback quality variables only.

The standardized path coefficients for the path model are presented in Figure 2. Five of the eleven proposed relationships were supported.

All the predictors together accounted for around 31% of the variance in the student learning from community service outcome variable ($R = .31, p = .001$). Client feedback quality significantly and positively predicted student learning from community service ($p < .01$), while organizational feedback quality failed to significantly predict this outcome variable ($p > .05$). Consistent with the bivariate correlations, feedback-seeking did not positively predict student learning from community service ($p > .05$). Relationships between feedback approach and feedback avoidance with student learning from community service were in the predicted direction. The former positively predicted the outcome variable ($p < .01$), while the latter negatively predicted it ($p < .01$). Learning and performance goal orientations did not significantly predict student learning from community service ($p > .05$). A learning goal orientation significantly and positively predicted feedback approach, while a performance goal orientation positively predicted feedback avoidance (both $p < .01$). Feedback approach, feedback avoidance, and goal orientation, however, failed to significantly predict feedback-seeking ($p > .05$).

Discussion

Client Feedback Quality and Service-Learning

Client feedback allows students to understand the impact of their behaviors on the client, which helps them in assessing their own competence in relation to community service and in estimating the extent to which they are able to meet clients’ needs. Client feedback predicts student attainment of service-learning goals better than both supervisor and coworker feedback. This is probably because clients have more opportunity to observe student behaviors
than both supervisors and co-workers, and might also provide more realistic and specific feedback. In addition, feedback from clients can be easily monitored, especially through their verbal and nonverbal reactions to the service, while students would have to incur significant ego and self-presentation costs in asking their supervisors for feedback (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). It must be noted, however, that the absence of organizational feedback might hamper student learning and performance, even if this feedback is not as important a predictor of student learning from community service as client feedback. It is quite possible that in settings where students have a longer time commitment (e.g., 60 hours rather than 15 hours), there would be sufficient student rapport with supervisors and opportunities for supervisors to observe student performance. This would then translate into higher quality supervisory feedback with implications for higher student learning from community service.

**Feedback Disposition and Service-Learning**

Students who are positively disposed toward performance feedback seem to be successful in learning from their community service experiences, while students who tend to avoid feedback seem to be unsuccessful in learning from their community service experiences. This is probably because the former tend to monitor their environment for performance-related cues, seek feedback, and utilize the obtained feedback to better adapt to their environment. Learning and performance goal orientation influence student learning from community service through the mediation of feedback approach and feedback avoidance respectively. This is likely because goal orientation has a significant "trait-like" characteristic that broadly influences ways in which people react to their work context. Feedback disposition, on the other hand, is related to how positively or negatively people approach feedback. It, therefore, deals with a specific aspect of peoples’ work environment, i.e., their information environment (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978). Hence, it is not surprising that dispositional goal orientation—an indicator of the person’s mental framework toward achievement situations in general—predicts feedback disposition, i.e., the person’s approach toward feedback, which in turn predicts how well he/she learns from his/her community service experience. Goal orientation, in addition, probably impacts student learning from community service through the mediation of self-regulating mechanisms such as goal-setting and planning that help students be more effective as learners (Vandewalle & Cummings, in press).

**Performance Feedback and Service-Learning**

**Implications for Practice**

Students involved in service-learning, like people in other work settings, seek, respond to, and utilize performance feedback from different sources. Results of this study imply that performance feedback and learning goal orientation can enhance student learning from community service. Students engaged in a service-learning or internship experience might need to focus on seeking and utilizing both formal and informal feedback from varied sources in order to meet their learning goals. This can, of course, be a task involving considerable risks to self-esteem. Therefore, instructors can support and prepare students for the various ways in which specific feedback can be solicited and utilized. Similarly, supervisors working with service-learning students might pay more attention to constructive feedback delivery as a career and performance development mechanism. Regularly-conducted formal feedback sessions and feedback questionnaires can be used by the agency personnel for this purpose, along with more informal modes of feedback. Concurrently, agency personnel and instructors in the classroom might create environments that are more focused toward encouraging learning as opposed to performance goal orientation for the service-learning students. They could do this by suggesting that students experiment with innovative work strategies, set specific developmental goals, and interpret setbacks as learning opportunities rather than as personal failures. This is consistent with evidence that supportive learning environments can enhance “state” or situational learning goal orientation (Block, Roney, Geeter, Lopez, & Yang, 1995).

**Future Research**

Future research needs to examine the impact of variables such as “type” of client feedback (e.g., specific vs. ambiguous, realistic vs. unrealistic), organizational environment (e.g., learning-focused vs. performance-focused), and supervisory style (e.g., directive vs. facilitative) on student learning from community service. In this study, all data was collected from the students because of its focus on the students’ perceptions and interpretations of the quality of feedback in the community setting. Future studies need to adequately address the client or organizational perspective by collecting data from these sources as well. Finally, the present model needs to be tested with similar student populations in other experiential education programs such as internships, practica, and cooperative education.

**Note**

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References


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**Appendix A**

*Items From 3 Instruments Used in the Study*

**Student Learning from Community Service Instrument Items**

1. I can very clearly see the connections between what I have learned in my classes and what actually happens in the field.
2. I am very aware of the important work-related issues that practitioners in my field often face.
3. I am very aware of my main strengths that I can use to be an effective practitioner.
4. I am very aware of my main weaknesses that I need to address to be an effective practitioner.
5. I am very aware of my values, beliefs, and my assumptions about people and work.
6. I am strongly committed to applying the knowledge gained in the classroom.
7. I strongly feel that I have the necessary skills to be an effective practitioner.
8. I am strongly committed to helping people in need.
9. I am very aware of the problems faced by the people in the community.
10. I am strongly committed to volunteering for community service causes in the immediate future.

**Feedback Disposition Instrument Items**

1. Typically, asking for feedback from one’s supervisor requires too much effort.
2. If I ask for feedback, people tend to think of me as somebody who is uncertain and needs help.
3. I tend to regard feedback as useful information rather than as “bad news.”
4. I tend to seek performance-related feedback more than other people like me.
5. Typically, instead of helping me, feedback ends up disrupting my work.
6. Most of the feedback I have received in the past has been of help to me.
7. I wish I could receive more “objective” feedback rather than vague statements about my performance.

**Goal Orientation Instrument Items**

1. I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from.
2. I would rather prove my ability on a task that I can do well at than to try a new task.
3. I often look for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.
4. I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might perform poorly.
5. I try to figure out what it takes to prove my ability to others at work.
6. For me, development of my work ability is important enough to take risks.