

HOW ACADEMICS VIEW AND USE STUDENT FEEDBACK: AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The way in which academic staff use student feedback to inform their academic practices differs among universities, academic units and even individual staff – especially where there might be a clash between institutional ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ cultures. The authors explored the views of academic staff at one South African university as to whether and how their academic work is mediated by such feedback. Activity theory (AT) served as a conceptual lens, while narrative data from a sample of academic staff across disciplinary clusters and post levels were analysed for a better understanding of the relationship between student feedback and how such feedback potentially influences academic work. Our findings indicated that an institutional focus primarily on research may significantly constrain the influence of student feedback on teaching practices. These findings also urge research-led universities to take cognisance of the intricate nature of the teaching and learning process, and of how teaching-related resources such as student feedback are influenced by other activity systems operating within the university context.

Keywords: activity theory; student feedback; university teaching practices; research versus teaching; professional learning; performativity

1. INTRODUCTION

The unique institutional contexts of universities have implications for how the role of student feedback may be understood and approached (Gordon & Fittler, 2004; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). Aspects such as institutional policies and cultures, the importance of teaching versus research, and how research or teaching is valued and evaluated, may all exert influence on how university academics approach their academic practices (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). One prominent feature is whether and how academics make use of student feedback to mediate these practices. Previous research (Smith, 2008) found that relationships between student feedback and the quality of academic practices are less clear and the availability of student feedback information does not automatically seem to result in the maintenance or improvement of teaching practices.

The term ‘student feedback’ refers to pertinent information provided by students about their experiences of academics’ teaching practices and resonates with associated terms such as ‘student evaluation of teaching’, ‘student satisfaction’ and ‘student ratings’ (HEA, 2014; Ryan, 2015). Student feedback is generally acknowledged as an essential source of (a) information about the quality of university teaching and (b) its potential use to inform academics’ perspectives of such quality (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014).

1.1. The link between student feedback and academics’ work

Challenges for academic staff who constantly have to make choices about what parts of their academic work to emphasise and attend to, are exacerbated by institutional expectations to uphold the functions of teaching, research and service at the same time (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). In institutions where research is generally more valued and rewarded, the tension between teaching and research is significant (Rice, 2012). This seems increasingly true for all South African universities – especially where dual career opportunities for academic staff (i.e. a focus on either teaching or research) are not viable or possible (Boughey & McKenna, 2011).

Academic staff may thus respond differently to issues raised by students in their feedback, with some viewing the responses as enabling while others experiencing the feedback as constraining or challenging. Such divergent experiences and responses influence how the value of feedback, and student feedback in particular, is perceived and experienced. Interrogating the links between student feedback and academics’ teaching practices could therefore provide useful insights into faculty responses to such feedback. One helpful lens for exploring such links is activity theory.

1.2. Activity theory

Psychologist-researcher Kurt Lewin famously stated that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. Activity theory proposes that the relationship between an acting subject and action-driving object can be mediated by socio-cultural artefacts that are available within the activity system, including tools, signs, symbols and people (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). This mediated association makes an 'activity lens' suitable for exploring the relationship between university academics (the subjects), their academic goals (the objects) and how academics (the subjects) use student feedback (the artefact) towards realising their (academic) goals.

As most academic work is situated and contextualised (Van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017) it is susceptible to various influences at play within university spaces. Student feedback is also a contextualised activity that cannot be properly understood outside of its performed context (Boud & Molloy, 2013). The fact that activity theory acknowledges the influence of context in the form of rules, community, institutional culture and a division of labour, adds to its suitability as an analytical lens.

Furthermore, activity theory proposes that people possess agency that enables them to decide how they would engage within a particular activity system (Roth & Lee, 2007). This suggests that academics can decide how they would want to engage within a teaching and learning activity system that is potentially mediated by student feedback. These decision-making processes then influence how their activities evolve within this system. Activity theory thus also provides a framework to study how agency and decision-making processes influence professional practices.

The presence of contradictions and difficulties within an activity system and how these lead to change in activities and activity systems, is also valuable (Engeström, 2009). Given the complexities of academic work, within ever-changing research-led or teaching-led university contexts, contradictions or discrepancies between what academics aspire to use student feedback for, and what they perceive it to be used for within the institutional context, are possible. An activity theory lens provides an avenue to explore how such contradictions or discrepancies shape and influence academic practices in general and teaching practices in particular.

1.2.1. Situating the study

Internationally, higher education continues to face the challenges resulting from massification, managerialism, democratisation and transformation. In South Africa these challenges often manifest in teaching large classes, increasing student diversity, increased numbers of underprepared students, pressures to publish, and decreasing financial support for universities (Bouhey & McKenna, 2011; Altbach, 2013). It is against this background that academics are expected to contribute towards teaching, research and community service (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007).

In addition, the prevailing culture of performativity (Ball, 2012) often requires academics to choose which activities to focus on at particular stages of their careers to advance their future prospects (Rice, 2012). Tensions between, for instance, teaching and research can occur with research often perceived as being more valuable and prestigious than teaching. The professionalisation of university teaching may thus be compromised and could influence how faculty respond to their teaching duties in general, and to student feedback in particular (Leibowitz, *et al.*, 2015). Universities in South Africa face similar challenges.

In this study we set out to explore university teachers' interpretations of and responses to student feedback data within a research-led university context. The work was conducted at a medium-sized, research-led public university in South Africa. The institution runs a centrally managed student feedback system, with a student feedback policy that guides the institutional student feedback process. Standardised questionnaires are used, but academic staff have the option of using customised questionnaires for particular academic environments, for example where student tutorials, clinical rotations or research education are applicable.

1.2.2. The teaching and learning activity system

The teaching and learning activity system at any academic institution is potentially mediated by student feedback, as illustrated by Figure 1 below.

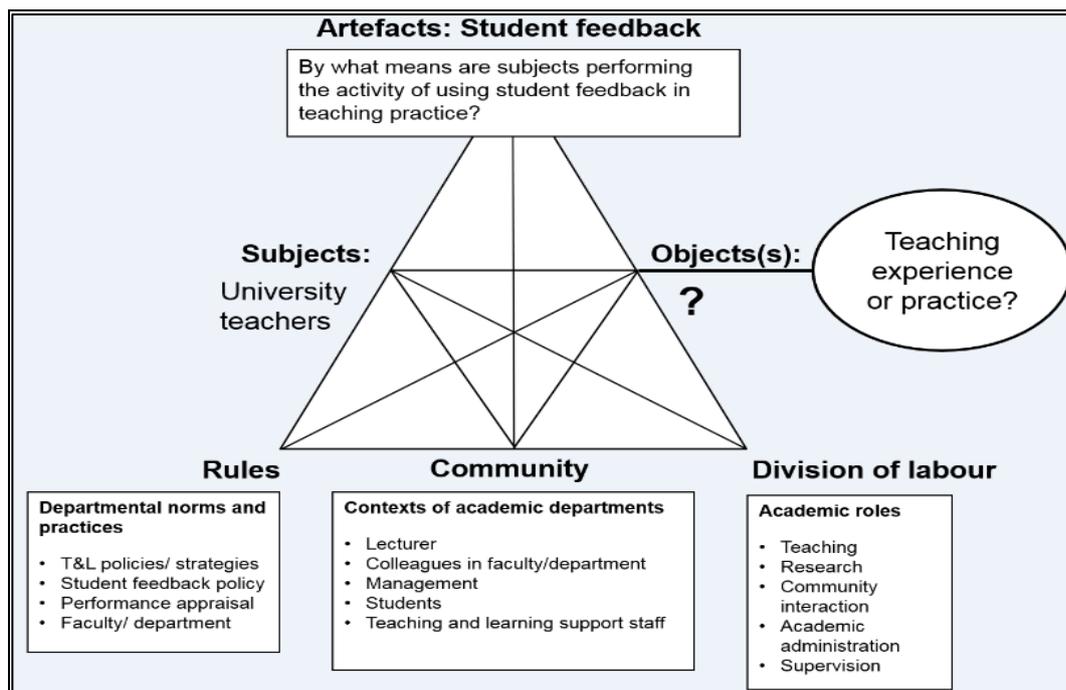


Figure 1: The institutional teaching and learning activity system as potentially mediated by student feedback (adapted from Engeström, 2001).

Within the institutional activity system, the **subjects** are represented by the academic *staff* who act, inter alia, by teaching. As academics might define their **object** of teaching differently, it was important in this research to inquire into their conceptions of teaching and learning. It was anticipated that such conceptions would reveal how they teach, why they teach in particular ways, and what informs their decisions to use (or not use) student feedback to inform their academic practices (Ginns, Kitay & Prosser, 2008; Flodén, 2017).

In mediating the links between academic staff and their goals (or objects) for teaching, they make use of various instruments or **artefacts** to attain such objects. Artefacts can thus influence how a subject's activities will relate to the object and intended outcome of the activity (Engeström, 2014). In the case of the studied institutional activity system, *student feedback* information represents the mediating artefact between individual faculty members and, for instance, their teaching practices.

The **community** context of teaching includes other participants who are part of the activity system and who may have similar or different goals within the system. The broader national higher education context also makes demands in terms of **rules**, norms and standards for teaching at public universities. These national demands generally filter down into institutional policies, rules, regulations and processes, all which govern or mediate the university's activities. Policies and rules are further interpreted in faculties and academic departments where they translate into departmental norms and practices. In addition, there is also a **division of labour** within this activity system, where academics perform various academic roles and responsibilities beyond teaching (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007).

2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Using activity theory as analytical lens and in an attempt to find out whether and how academic staff value and act upon student feedback, this study set out to explore the possible links between teaching, student feedback and the teaching-learning context at a research-led university (Flodén, 2017). Specifically, it aimed to explore and describe how a number of selected university teachers engaged with student feedback in their teaching and whether and how such engagement influenced their teaching practices. It therefore sought to determine how the link between university teachers and their professional teaching practices might be influenced by the availability of student feedback, especially within the context of a research-led university.

In particular, the study wanted to determine how university teachers, at a research-led university, experience the role of student feedback in their professional teaching practices.

The following objectives assisted in addressing the aim of the study:

- a) To better understand the concept of student feedback on teaching.
- b) To identify the contexts that influence student feedback on teaching.
- c) To determine how university teachers at one research-led university use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching.
- d) To determine how student feedback might become more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university.

3. METHODOLOGY

An institutional case study was employed to determine how academics at (in this case) a research-led university experience student feedback to mediate their teaching practices. A sample of 16 academics was purposely selected by using the following inclusion criteria:

- Representation from four disciplinary clusters, namely Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), Humanities and Social Sciences (Humanities), Science, Engineering and Technology (SET), and Health Sciences (HS);
- One faculty member from each of the four post levels (i.e. *junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, professor*) in each of the four disciplinary clusters participated, thus totalling the 16 participants.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Primary data resulted from semi-structured interviews, guided by the activity theory triangle heuristic. Institutional student feedback policies were analysed as secondary data, offering an understanding of a particular social and institutional context with interpretational value (Plowright, 2011).

Data analysis comprised an iterative process which required an initial inductive exploration, followed by a more deductive re-visit of the data according to the activity theory framework. Data analysis paid close attention to the four post levels of the participating faculty and the four disciplinary clusters in which they teach.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Data according to participants' post levels

The first level of analysis was stratified according to the four post levels of the participating academic staff (see Figure 2 below).

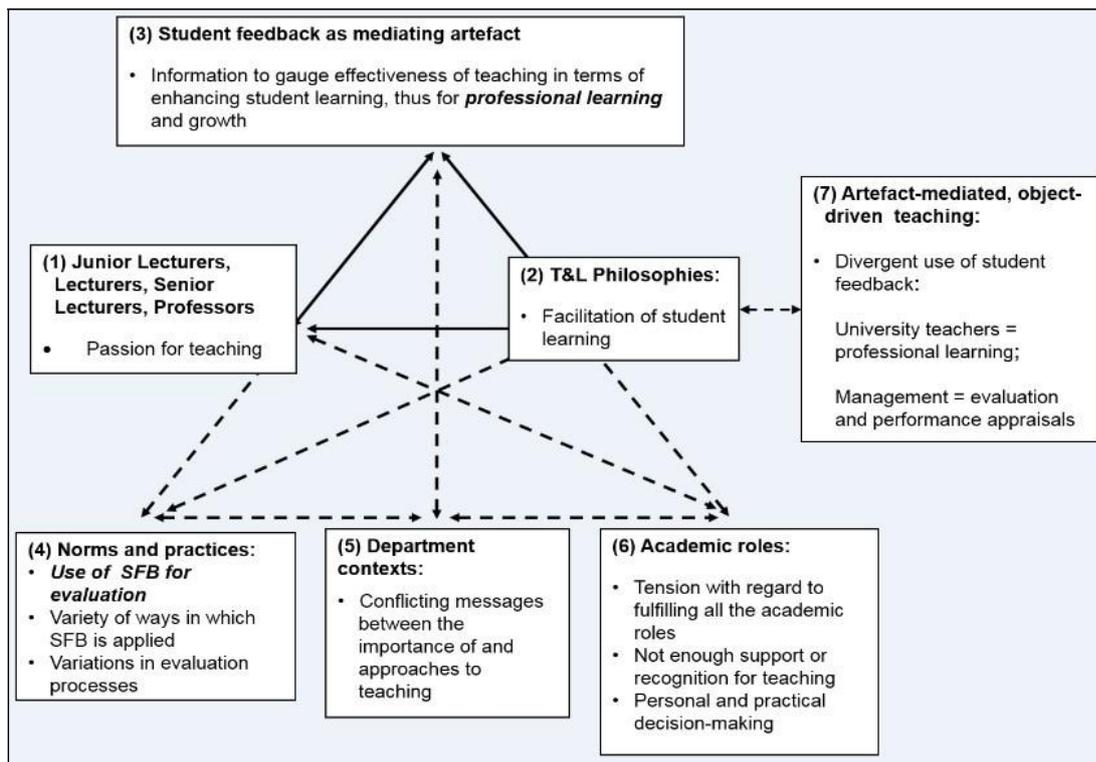


Figure 2: Summary of the narrative data across four faculty post levels.

Participants across all four post levels viewed student feedback as a valuable source of information to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching. One senior lecturer (SL2) confirmed: 'We should see student feedback as a resource, and it should help us guide our practice.' Another lecturer (L4) remarked: '[The students] are a rich source of information... I think they are worth listening to.'

With regard to the contextual factors pertaining to the student feedback processes in departments, professors reported divergent approaches to and uses of student feedback. They questioned the appropriateness of the use of student feedback for performance appraisal purposes: 'I'm not sure about the wisdom of using it for performance assessment' (P4).

These professors also experienced pressure to generate research outputs which often led them to choose research above teaching. One of the professors (P3) remarked: 'I find it stressful and feel that I simply cannot handle all the pressure...trying to cut down on preparation time for teaching; using the same course over.' Another also referred to the tension between teaching and research: '... the message that the University sends out – that we are a research institute and therefore research is more important than teaching' (P1).

The senior lecturers described how student feedback was used in a variety of ways, and often viewed as unfair practice. They voiced concerns about a lack of recognition for teaching. Such challenges seemed to constrain the optimal use of student feedback for professional learning purposes: 'I think it's not always recognised. There's not much formal recognition for teaching and that means that other academic roles such as research gets preference in most cases (SL3)'.

Participants appointed as lecturers, however, honoured their commitment to teaching and continued to use student feedback for the purpose of enhancing their teaching practice. Some lecturers reported making personal choices to prioritise teaching, even though this had the potential of undermining their career advancement: 'I am very interested in research, but teaching in an undergraduate programme takes up most of the time...I allow it because I feel [teaching] is important...' (L2).

Junior lecturers reported high teaching loads, suggesting that the bulk of their time is taken up by teaching duties. Although they have an array of teaching responsibilities, their department heads would often only use a single quantitative measure from student feedback to evaluate their teaching:

'...the only thing they look at for the students' feedback is a quantitative value' (JL1). These junior lecturers also reported dissatisfaction with the variety of ways in which student feedback was used by their line managers. Despite these challenges, the junior lecturers reported systematic approaches towards analysing their student feedback and reflecting on how they could respond appropriately.

Closer inspection of the data revealed the institutional performance appraisal system as having particular influence on the extent to which student feedback has the potential to mediate academic practices. The activity theory principle of historicity was revealed as the performance appraisal system that increasingly shaped and transformed (Engeström, 2001) student feedback away from a developmental focus towards an evaluative focus. One participant stated, for instance: 'So what was originally meant to be a good reflective instrument, now becomes a paper exercise, because it has a different purpose now.' (JL3).

The multi-voicedness of the teaching and learning activity system with various participants interpreting the object of the activity in different and often conflicting ways, was also highlighted. Ensuring clear and shared understanding among all participants (students, teaching faculty and university management) of the purpose of student feedback, hence appears as an area for expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010) where a common object for the use of student feedback could be developed. One participant suggested:

'The university should give direction on how they would want faculties, departments and lecturers to use it. They must communicate to lecturers by saying that student feedback is used for this and not used for that' (P1).

This re-appreciation would require of academic departments to revisit their rules, norms and conventions for using and responding to student feedback as part of the teaching and learning process. New norms and conventions could lead to new practices, such as providing support to academic staff on how to interpret and respond to student feedback, as well as encouraging a more continuous cycle of feedback for formative purposes. In these ways the current system could be transformed through the agency shown and new practices implemented by participants within the system and potentially promote transformation of academic emphasis over time (Roth & Lee, 2007).

5.2. Data from four disciplinary clusters

The second tier of data analysis followed the same pattern as the first, but in this case four disciplinary clusters were represented (see Figure 3).

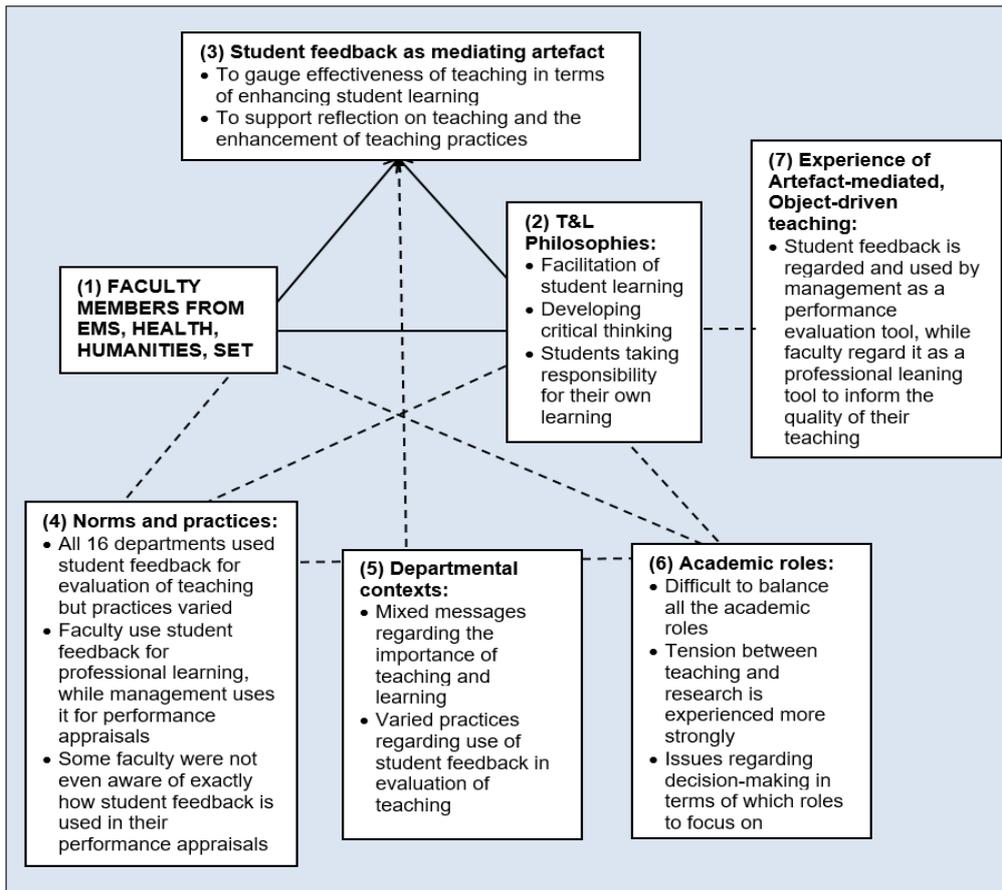


Figure 3: Summary of the findings across the four disciplinary clusters.

The disciplinary and departmental contexts within which the participating academic staff were employed at the time of the study varied significantly. For instance, those academics in the EMS and HS clusters reported a high regard for teaching perceived as a crucial academic function, while in the Humanities and SET clusters there were mixed messages. With the exception of the HS cluster, the other departments represented in the study used student feedback mainly for performance appraisal processes, but in a variety of ways. The HS cluster valued student feedback information mainly to encourage dialogue with the aim to improve teaching quality. This was also the only cluster that reported having structures in place where aggregated student feedback was discussed regularly:

'For all of our modules we have some system of feedback and the feedback is looked at on an individual basis and it's also looked at on a module coordinator level, the Head of Department and our programme coordinator, who then disseminates it to the whole of the staff.' (SL2).

The four EMS participants indicated that the struggle to balance all their academic roles, which often caused them to make decisions in terms of which academic roles to focus on: 'It places a tremendous amount of personal stress to maintain a research record...so something's got to give somewhere' (P1).

These tensions were further promoted by an emphasis on teaching in order to satisfy the requirements of external programme accreditation. On the one hand, participants remained committed to the delivery of quality teaching that would enhance their students' learning and to using student feedback to realise this purpose. On the other, one senior lecturer pointed out that 'management' uses student feedback 'for only one purpose...that's the stick that you're hit with if it's bad' (SL1). The contradiction between management's use of student feedback and the academics' use thereof was mostly experienced negatively, placing an impediment on a more robust use of student feedback for professional development.

The Humanities cluster regarded the facilitation of student learning as a key objective of their teaching, yet they too reported mixed messages regarding the importance of student feedback. Academic staff seemed to utilise student feedback data to reflect on how their teaching practices influenced their students' learning. One lecturer remarked: 'I take the advice from it and... I will implement things if there is a chance' (L3). However, the overall sense was that student feedback was mainly used by management for performance appraisal.

Student feedback was considered by the SET participants as useful for improving teaching practice. SET management, as in other clusters, seemed to mainly use student feedback for performance appraisal. For some of the SET departments, the evaluation of teaching appeared to hinge on a single quantitative figure deduced from student feedback information, while others shared serious concerns about the performance appraisal of teaching as a once-a-year event, with little or no engagement around issues of improvement or development: 'We engage with that document under pressure once a year and they never care about the development' (L4). Once again it appeared that various practices were followed in terms of how student feedback was used for teaching and learning purposes, pointing to some contradiction in various stakeholders' views about the value and use of student feedback.

6. DISCUSSION

Our main findings from the study indicate that student feedback practices are very much influenced by university culture and context. In this case the context was mainly research-led and within such a context, student feedback seems to make a limited contribution to improving the academic practices of university lecturers. This concurs with findings by Mitten and Ross (2016) among recipients of teaching awards at research-led universities, who reported that student feedback information contributed minimally to the improvement of their teaching practices. The main factor was rather personal drive and satisfaction.

Our results further suggest that student feedback practices are situated in two different activity systems, namely the activity system for performance appraisal of teaching and the activity system for the professional learning of academics. These two systems appear to have different emphases. For instance, within the performance appraisal system the notion of performativity mediates student feedback practices in a primarily evaluative and quantitative manner. Within the professional learning system, however, student feedback is regarded as a qualitative, formative professional learning opportunity for improving the quality of academic work and teaching in particular. This portrays academics as simultaneously being part of different activity systems while engaging in a single interaction (teaching and learning), and thus having to concurrently operate under differing sets of rules and divisions of labour (Ashwin, 2012). Hence, an activity theory framework substantially clarifies the complexities of interactions within a teaching and learning environment that is particularly infused by a research-led agenda. If the same study was repeated in a teaching-oriented institution, the results could be quite different.

What also emerged from our study is that the potential role of student feedback in university teaching practices seems to be influenced over time by other subsystems. This is in accordance with the activity principle of historicity, which claims that activity systems are shaped and transformed over periods of time (Engeström, 2001). For instance, an increased culture of performativity has transformed the student feedback system from having an individualised, developmental focus to increasingly becoming a more standardised and evaluative human resource tool at departmental level. The multiple voices playing into the student feedback system, based on the various stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, could lead to contradictions and struggles in defining the motives and objects of the activity. These contradictions and struggles could either present opportunities for expansive learning or constrain the activities within the particular system.

The contradictory objectives in the performance appraisal system and the professional learning system potentially cause the teaching and learning interactions within a research-led university context to result in divergent outcomes. To address this issue, further research that focuses on the interactions between such activity systems may assist in developing a shared objective which could mediate the dual use of student feedback for performance appraisal and professional learning more optimally. The revealed contradictions thus present opportunities for expansive transformation of the

teaching and learning interactions towards a shared goal within a research-led university context (also see Knight *et al.*, 2006).

7. CONCLUSION

The activity theory lens used in this study proved useful for unearthing university practices that constrain the use of student feedback. The contradictions and diversity that were reported, particularly with regard to the use of student feedback in mid-level management processes, were revealed by studying the links between these practices and how university teachers subsequently experienced and responded to student feedback. The triangle heuristic also helped to reveal instances of faculty taking up agency by preferring teaching over research despite the potential constraints it could put on their future career prospects. Such cases emphasise that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' when it comes to the importance of student feedback on teaching. While some academic staff at higher education institutions might flourish on a career geared towards research, others might consider undergraduate teaching being the 'lifeline' of the institution and thus pay much more attention to how students respond to such teaching.

Consideration of the multi-voicedness of the teaching and learning activity system as it pertains to the dual use of student feedback may thus be an important aspect for a research-led institution (or any other university with a different output emphasis) to consider if a shared object regarding the dual role of student feedback in university teaching is to be achieved. These enhanced insights imply the need for a guiding framework for ethical practice across all levels of participation in the academic activity system in response to a better understanding of the value and use of student feedback within different university contexts. While it seems true that at some institutions undergraduate teaching and students' feedback on such teaching is an important management tool towards teaching improvement, other institutions, or even departments at the same institution, might leave it completely up to individual lecturers to decide how and when they want to respond to student feedback. This creates an ethical dilemma in terms of why and for what purpose students provide feedback. Until this dilemma is addressed uniformly in policy and other measures, student feedback on lecturers' teaching and its use might remain a rather marginalised activity.

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