Breana Bayraktar, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY, bbayrakt@gmu.edu
Kiruthika Ragupathi, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, kiruthika@nus.edu.sg
Katherine A. Troyer, TRINITY UNIVERSITY, ktroyer@trinity.edu

Building Trust Through Feedback: A Conceptual Framework

ABSTRACT

Trust is fundamental for effective student engagement with feedback in higher education. This study aimed to develop a conceptual framework delineating the specific instructor practices and learning environment conditions that facilitate trustful feedback processes. Open-ended survey responses from higher education instructors (n=147) were analysed using a qualitative methodology. Analysis revealed three key environmental conditions for building trust-based relationships: positive non-judgment; inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence; and dialogue and discussion. Three instructor feedback practices were found to promote student agency: showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities, communicating high expectations, and promoting student self-evaluation. These relationship-building conditions and agency-promoting practices operate synergistically, as represented by our framework of *Building Trust Through Feedback*. By continuously cultivating this interplay of environmental and relational factors, instructors can engender greater reciprocity, vulnerability, and growth during the feedback process. The proposed framework provides guidance on trust-building pedagogies that enhance student engagement and learning. Further research should explore student perspectives on practices that build trusting instructor-student relationships.

KEYWORDS

trust, instructor feedback, relationship-building, agency-developing

INTRODUCTION

Trust is a critical component of effective feedback practices in higher education (Carless 2013). It is also the key to building sustained, mutually beneficial interactions between students and teachers (Carless 2013; Curzon-Hobson 2002; Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland 2023). Curzon-Hobson (2002) adds that trust forms the basis for building a dialogic learning environment. In other words, instructors must take deliberate actions to build trust (Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland 2023). A student's trust can be gained (or lost) depending on their instructor's actions and reactions, and instructors need to offer emotional support and opportunities to help students trust their instructors and peers (Nieminen and Carless 2023; Xu and Carless 2017). Carless (2013) writes that "recurring opportunities for communication characterized by openness and empathy create spaces for participants to demonstrate their trustworthiness" (94). For example, offering dialogic formative feedback encourages students to become comfortable revealing their conceptions, understandings, ignorance, flaws, and mistakes. Other trust-building actions by a teacher include acts of authentic listening (Curzon-Hobson 2002), offering quality feedback, sharing information, admitting to mistakes, and maintaining confidentiality (Carless 2013). Finally, students' trust is also built through

authentic listening. The instructor affirms students' diverse perspectives, differing opinions, conflicting ideas, and their interrelationships in the world (Curzon-Hobson 2002). Hattingh (2023) reminds us of the significance of communicating "expectations and criteria" (11), while Padayachee and Naidoo (2023) highlight the "importance of the social dimension" (3) in fostering a conversation and building trust between instructors and students.

The "cognitions, emotions, and behaviors" of students and teachers (Winstone and Carless 2019, 7) make the feedback process complex. Therefore, feedback ought to be seen more as a "social and contextual process" (Jensen, Bearman, and Boud 2021, 31) that goes beyond a simple sharing of student grades and performance. In this way, feedback can be positioned to create strong social relationships between teachers and students. These relationships—and the trust that builds within them—are closely related to effective engagement with feedback (Li and De Luca 2014; O'Donovan et al. 2021; Pokorny and Pickford 2010). Feedback, therefore, should be dialogic: a two-way process which facilitates instructor-student and student-student interactions while also promoting self-learner engagement (Nicol 2010). In this way, when students and faculty are actively engaged in the give-and-take process of sharing their own thoughts and listening to others' ideas, feedback can become an authentic conversation within the learning environment.

Several studies use frameworks and models to articulate the core elements of feedback and trust. More recently, Boud and Dawson (2023) outlined a feedback competency framework at macro, meso, and micro levels, and Carless and Winstone (2023) proposed a socio-constructivist framework highlighting the design, relational, and pragmatic dimensions of feedback. While most of these proposed models and frameworks do not examine the role of trust in facilitating feedback practices, Carless (2013) identified ten key features for "facilitating dialogic feedback" (91) within a framework of "competence trust" and "communication trust." These 10 features include: classroom atmosphere, relationship building, establishing dialogue, promoting student self-evaluation, establishing high expectations, inviting elaboration, responding positively and non-judgmentally, showing empathy, listening attentively and valuing the ideas of others, and student faith in the teacher.

Turning to our own data, we wanted to see whether and how Carless's (2013) dialogic feedback features could illuminate what our participants did as part of their feedback processes and practices to build trust. Thus, in our research, we used the framework by Carless to initially code our data deductively. In doing so, we found that Carless's framework, while a critical springboard for us, did not fully capture what we were seeing in our data. The themes we identified began to distinguish themselves as either instructor practices or environmental conditions. In order to better understand our findings, we turned to the nuanced framework of "trust moves" offered by Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023). Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland rely on different frameworks on trust (e.g., Jones and George 1998; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; McKnight and Chervany 2001; Payne, Stone, and Bennett 2022) when developing their own framework of teacher-initiated trust moves for "understanding, enacting, and studying the actions higher education classroom teachers make to try to establish and build trust with their students" (2). Their four trust-moves (which are cognition-based, affect-based, identity-based, and values-based) highlight the intersectional nature of trust and the ways that trust can be built not only through actions and practices but also through context and environmental conditions. Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland's (2023) framework consequently allowed us to better refine our own articulation of the complexities of trust and feedback.

METHODS AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our research design was approved by the institutional review boards of our respective universities: George Mason University, Northern Virginia Community College, National University of Singapore, and Trinity University.

Data collection

Data used in this project was collected as part of a larger survey on instructors' perceptions of their feedback practices and beliefs. We used a convergent mixed methods design, where we collected quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analysed both strands independently, and then merged the results during interpretation. This approach combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, converging different but complementary data helping us validate our findings, deepen our insights, and offer a more nuanced perspective.

We collected data from 147 participants at a range of research sites (North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia) and varied institutional contexts (small liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and research-intensive universities). We did ask demographic questions to collect data on specific aspects of participants' personal identities (e.g., discipline, race/ethnicity, gender, teaching experience, teaching load) and institutional details (e.g., type, size). Table 1 provides a basic breakdown of participant demographic data; analysis on these demographic differences, however, were not performed for this study and will be reported in a separate study.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Discipline	Arts/humanities/social sciences (72) Science/technology/engineering/maths (46) Business/healthcare (28) Did not specify (1)
Age	Younger than 40 years (39) 40–49 years (47) 50–59 years (41) Did not specify (1)
Gender	Female (88) Male (56) Not answered (3)
Size of courses taught	Under 20 students (8) 21–50 students (60) 51-100 students (35) 101-200 students (26) More than 200 students (17) Did not specify (1)
Courses taught per term	1 course (40) 2 courses (46) 3 courses (44) > 4 courses (16) Did not specify (1)

Our survey was adapted from Winstone and Carless's (2019) research to include 11 items of their survey that evaluate instructors' feedback practices and nine items that evaluate instructors' feedback beliefs. In addition, we included four open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses and examples of feedback beliefs and practices. (See Table 2 for the list of open-ended questions). We opted to use a questionnaire with several open-ended questions as a viable approach to gather qualitative data on instructors' perceptions of their feedback practices and student responses to feedback from a greater number of instructors. In responding to these open-ended questions, participants also reported specific strategies that they used and shared specific responses from students to these strategies. For this study we only analysed responses to the four open-ended questions in Table 2.

Table 2. Open-ended survey questions

OE1	What is the most important thing you have done to enhance the feedback processes in your teaching? How do you see this feedback strategy enhancing your students' understanding and use of feedback?
OE2	When you return feedback to students, how do you expect students to engage with the information? What do you see as your responsibilities, and the responsibilities of your students, in this process?
OE3	How does your feedback practice play a role in creating a (more) inclusive environment? Please share one specific feedback strategy that you believe contributes to building an inclusive learning experience.
OE4	Is there anything else regarding feedback, as it applies to teaching and learning, that you want to share?

Data analysis

We began analysis of the qualitative data from the open-ended questions with deductive coding (Saldaña 2021), using pre-established or *a priori* codes based on existing literature about feedback literacy and trust: specifically, Carless's (2013) features of dialogic feedback. Deductive coding allowed us to systematically organise and categorise data based on pre-existing concepts and theories; in this case, Carless's (2013) work on trust and feedback. The *a priori* codes we used in initial rounds of coding are listed in Table 3. Through discussion of the data coded with the initial coding scheme, we realised that our participants' words and perspectives were not always accurately captured by or reflected in the initial codes. After deliberation, we collapsed the codes of "classroom atmosphere" and "relationship building" into one code, labelled "valuing community and collaboration." We also added "sensitivity to student identities" to the code of "showing empathy" and added a new code of "developing student agency." After completing these revisions to the coding scheme, we ended up with eight codes (see "second round codes" in Table 3), that we then applied during a second round of coding, where we each individually re-coded all the data using this new coding scheme.

Table 3. A priori codes

Initial a priori codes	Second round codes
classroom atmosphere and relationship building	merged into: valuing community and collaboration
establishing dialogue	creating dialogue and discussion
promoting student self-evaluation	promoting student self-evaluation
establishing high expectations	communicating high expectations
listening attentively and valuing the ideas of others	listening attentively and valuing the ideas of others
inviting elaboration	*not found to be applicable to these data*
responding positively and non-judgmentally	responding positively and non-judgmentally
showing empathy	showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities
student faith in the teacher	*not found to be applicable to these data*
not included in Carless (2013)	developing student agency

In coding our own data, we discovered that while our participants' answers often mirrored Carless's 10 features of dialogic feedback (2013), there was nevertheless some overlap between the factors that allowed us to collapse two or more codes into one. For example, Carless's factors of "classroom atmosphere" and "relationship building" both centred on community and interdependence, and so we created our own code of Inclusion, Community, and Interdependence. We also realised that Carless's factor of "student faith in the teacher" could not be explored properly in our own data, which only examined instructors' perceptions rather than students' reactions; therefore, we eliminated this code from our analysis.

More importantly, though, we discovered an interesting pattern emerging when coding our data. Not only were these factors for dialogic feedback present within our own participants' responses, but we recognized two larger categories: "learning environment conditions" and "instructor feedback practices." The first category, "learning environment conditions," involved strategic planning and execution to create a space where not only the instructor but also the students were primed for certain interactions and responses. We identified three themes (revised slightly from our second-round codes to be restated as conditions)—positive non-judgment; inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence; and dialogue and discussion—as belonging to this first category of learning environment conditions.

The second category, "instructor feedback practices," referred to the distinct and explicit moves that instructors enacted. We identified three additional themes—communicating high expectations, showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities, and promoting student self-evaluation—as practices that shift feedback agency to their students. By agency, we mean what Nicol and Kushwah (2024) highlight: the dual process where students actively seek and respond to instructor feedback while simultaneously exercising implicit control over their own learning through

interactions with other resources and self-comparisons on their own work. Thus, it is an important component in building trust through the feedback process. Taken together, "learning environment conditions" and "instructor feedback practices" create spaces where the feedback process contributes to the building of trust. We did not see either the practices or conditions as being of higher value or priority than the other; instead, our data revealed that it was the interplay between "learning environment conditions" and "instructor feedback practices" that became both the mechanism for, and a feature of, building trust between instructors and students through feedback.

FINDINGS

Through multiple rounds of coding, we uncovered six overarching themes for building trust-based relationships and environment. In this section, we explore these six themes, drawing on the rich insights in our participants' own words and language.

Learning environment conditions
Positive non-judgment

The practice of offering positive and non-judgmental responses emphasises the importance of providing intentional positive feedback to students. Through focusing on the things students have done well and giving targeted feedback on specific areas for improvement, a trusting classroom environment can be fostered. Participants described responding positively to student work and aiming for an open and non-judgmental discussion as ways in which they helped build relationships with students and ultimately contributed to a trusting classroom environment. One way participants described doing this was through deliberate efforts to provide positive feedback; as one participant explained: "I think that being intentional about giving feedback on things students have done well creates a more inclusive environment . . . pointing out the things they've done well encourages them and builds their self-efficacy."

Another strategy employed by participants was to provide targeted feedback focusing on a few key points. This approach avoided overwhelming students and allowed them to effectively address and work on the given feedback. By limiting feedback to specific areas, it helped create an environment where students did not perceive themselves as stronger or weaker compared to their peers. As one participant described:

> I used to give too much feedback and students were overwhelmed. I switched to giving three things to work on for subsequent assignments, and have had a positive response from students and have seen more students accept and try to address feedback. I overhear students talking about their "three items" and comparing and so with every student having three items for everyone, it doesn't create an environment where students have a perception of being stronger or weaker than their classmates.

Though positive non-judgment can appear in isolated interactions, such engagement is more powerful when it happens over a longer period of time. Many participants described how an iterative process that involves multiple drafts, reviews, and revisions helped build a trust-based relationship. They believed that such an approach, coupled with extensive feedback, enabled more students to engage in authentic work and reduces anxiety and self-censorship. For example, one participant explained:

> I've shifted class time, instructional focus, and grade weight away from final projects to iterative drafts, review, and revision foci. I find that an iterative, feedback-intensive process—with lots of rich engagement before a grade is applied—just generally allows more students to engage in authentic work as writers, without self-censoring or fighting through anxiety.

Overall, participants in this study demonstrated positive non-judgment through consistent engagement and a focus on providing targeted feedback that made students feel supported rather than overwhelmed or singled out.

Inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence

The theme of inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence emerged from Carless's features of "classroom atmosphere" and "relationship building," which in our analysis were merged into a code of "valuing community and collaboration." Inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence highlights how participants' actions and intentions fostered a sense of community and collaboration among students through the development of a feedback culture. Participants described how they encouraged active student involvement in the learning process, and some even aimed to shift some authority from the teacher to the students. In the process, many of our participants spoke about creating an environment that promotes classroom connections instead of rivalries. One participant described how facilitating a "feedback culture" contributed to a sense of community and collaboration among their students:

> I want students to be actively involved in their learning and to create a feedback culture that builds classroom community rather than competition. My goal is to take my authority as the teacher out of the centre of the feedback and learning process.

Participant responses also addressed moves made towards building an environment of attentive, active listening and valuing others' ideas—skills needed to create an inclusive learning environment conducive for forming trusting relationships. Participants emphasised that authentic listening is not necessarily an inherent skill and spoke of the need to model authentic listening by coaching students on how to ask for feedback, articulate their needs, and both provide and engage with feedback. Authentic listening recognizes and respects student-student and student-instructor interrelationships and forms the basis for building a relationship of trust (Carless 2013; Curzon-Hobson 2002). Moreover, by valuing students' ideas and highlighting their strengths, teachers also promote a sense of trust and belonging among students. This feedback culture cultivates trust, and the dialogic interaction of feedback connects students to peers and instructors, thereby creating a space of constructive interdependence in the classroom. As one participant explained: "I invest significant time in teaching, modelling, and providing feedback on peer review." They shared that such guidance "allows all writers to feel enabled and valued as reviewers." More broadly, they see being transparent with students as "an inclusive move" and part of their strategy to create a classroom environment of interdependence. Another participant explained that they "teach students how to receive feedback well . . . with the intention of meeting them where they are in their development." Still another participant connected building these relationships to offering contextual support: "When I know more about their background, I can offer support better." These efforts enable students, as one participant wrote, "to have a say in what they want to achieve" and contribute to a classroom environment where trust can grow.

Other participants highlighted the need for adopting more conferences and consultations to establish an interactive relationship of constructive interdependence between individual students and themselves. One-on-one interactions and personal discussions were found to be particularly effective in developing rapport with students and supporting their learning. As one participant wrote:

> I explain to students what to expect (e.g., written feedback that is both formative and summative, a grade, etc.), and I encourage students to talk with me if they have questions or concerns regarding the feedback. I will directly contact individual students if I have concerns or special affirmation to offer related to the feedback.

While dialogic feedback is an important piece to building an inclusive classroom, some participants felt that building constructive interdependence should expand to encompass all instructor-student interactions. As one participant explained:

> I consider every interaction with students (not just feedback session [sic]) as an opportunity to show directions students [sic] enhance their learning. As long as this intention is genuine, students automatically feel that they are in a more inclusive environment. So instilling [an] inclusive environment does not happen just during the feedback session, but every encounter.

Overall, participants provided evidence of how they sought to develop a classroom environment that was inclusive and a culture that fostered interdependent relationships between class members through practices like the facilitation of peer feedback, one-on-one conferencing, and shifting authority from teacher to students. By empowering students and building connections between them, instructors foster an environment of trust, constructive interdependence, and communal learning. While participant responses included specific references to developing an inclusive learning environment, their responses did not explicitly report any potential influence of cultural factors or the role of socio-cultural contexts. Some participants did, however, highlight the importance of considering students' emotional and social needs as part of their feedback practices. They also identified feedback as the bridge that invites students from different cultures into a professional academic discourse. Participant responses focused on general principles and strategies for building trust and implementing feedback practices, but we recognize that these may manifest differently across varying socio-cultural contexts. In hindsight, we think that it may be important to ask participants more explicitly about cultural norms, values, and expectations on how feedback is perceived or how communication and relationships are navigated.

Dialogue and discussion

Carless (2013) argues that "the teacher as facilitator of dialogue" (100) is a critical component of a conducive feedback climate. Adopting this role can help students feel comfortable in openly asking for clarification without the need to mask their ignorance or mistakes. Part of creating a trusting dialogue is the process of explicitly guiding students in understanding and implementing feedback. For many of our participants, this required tailoring their feedback to each student. As one participant explained: "teach[ing] students how to receive feedback well . . . it is tailored to each student, with the intention of meeting them where they are in their development."

Many participants also spoke of the ways that empowering students with a sense of responsibility also guided students in understanding and implementing feedback. Several

participants wrote about how they encouraged students to actively seek feedback and develop their own solutions for improvement. This approach promotes student self-regulation and a sense of ownership over their learning process, as this participant shared:

> Students know from day one that I put in the effort and they are expected to do so (by reading it [the feedback]) and come to me with ideas/solutions in mind for improving. They have to give me solutions before I advise them on how to improve. They become more responsible and self-regulated in the process. Students love it. They feel heard and genuinely supported. Students love this!

Instructors in our study stressed the importance of ongoing, consistent engagement with the feedback process. They discussed how a dialogue was maintained with students through follow-up questions, discussions, and/or revision activities. They described fostering a culture of dialogue where students can seek clarification and actively participate in their own learning processes. Consequently, several described their feedback as a part of the process rather than the conclusion of the process, referencing "formative feedback [that the] students should apply it to improve their next assignment or communication skills" and "constructive feedback [. . .] that encourages them to review their work." One participant shared how they make this explicit for their students: "[I] stress to my students that feedback is the main way I [sic] am in conversation with them about their work and their interests."

In order for feedback to be a true dialogue, all students must be invited to join the conversation. Otherwise, feedback can only be a monologue of the instructor's thoughts. One participant shared what they saw as the larger significance of encouraging students to contribute to the dialogue:

> Rather than giving one-way feedback, my feedback sessions with students are usually a dialogue where they can voice their concerns about their learning and any initial reactions to my feedback. I think this contributes to a more inclusive learning experience by giving students a voice in their own learning. They have a say in what they want to achieve rather than a one-sided judgment of what is wrong with their learning.

In addition to whole-group feedback sessions, two popular strategies for creating trust through dialogue were one-on-one conferences and individual meetings. Individual conferences with students became a time to provide feedback, discuss students' progress, and devise plans for revisions. As one participant explained, an individual conference "allows students to ask questions about and understand the feedback I'm giving and gives us an opportunity to strategize for revisions." Other participants shared similar beliefs that conferences provide "students opportunities to question if they are confused by the feedback." Individualised meetings and conferences offer not only the space for students to directly engage with the feedback but also can serve as an opportunity for the instructor to build authentic connections with their students. One participant explained that meeting with a student individually became a way to "better accommodate their needs and make sure that we understand each other." Another participant shared that a conference "offers a private and personal setting and allows me to build relationships with my students. I think it allows me to create a relationship."

Many participants shared that, in addition to these moments of instructor-student dialogue, they also created opportunities for students to be in discussion with one another. Providing

opportunities for students to engage in peer feedback, as one participant shared, "creates different learning opportunities and increases the likelihood that more students will meet and talk to more different students than if they are not given peer feedback opportunities." At the same time, participants also identified how actively listening to others can lead to developing self-evaluative skills in their students. For instance, one participant explained that "peer feedback is a skill that transfers to self-assessment, which is crucial for people moving from student mode to professional mode."

Through practices like individualised feedback and dialogic exchanges, instructors aim to guide students in comprehending and applying feedback. By facilitating ongoing discussions around feedback, teachers cultivate a learning environment where the process of feedback is made more transparent so that students have more agency and voice.

Instructor feedback practices
Showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities

Trust in the feedback process is improved when instructors are emotionally sensitive to students' identities and show empathy (Steen-Utheim and Wittek 2017). In the feedback process, this trust can be established by empathising with students and conveying that they are being valued (Costa and Kallick 1993) and that their points of views are being considered (Carless 2013). Offering this type of feedback has the potential to not only increase students' understanding of the task at hand, but to help students find their place in higher education. As one of our participants shared, such feedback "helps demystify academic conventions that would otherwise be obtuse."

Empathetic feedback demonstrates sensitivity to students' identities and communicates to students that they are encouraged to ask for feedback, and that as teachers, we are invested in their learning, performance, and success. One participant shared that they saw their feedback as an opportunity to demonstrate to their students "that their efforts are valued and I return effort back to them when I take the time to carefully provide feedback." Another participant explained that they used their feedback not only to encourage their students to feel included and welcomed into the class, but into the discipline as well, explaining: "My feedback aims to prepare them for entering the field, improve their work for a professional portfolio, and increase their confidence and self-efficacy."

Students need to feel that their points of view are considered, that they are being heard, and that they can make mistakes during the learning process. Feedback rooted in empathy and sensitivity to students' identities is tailored to acknowledge students' individualised needs, interests, strengths, and areas for improvement. This involves creating feedback opportunities that meet students where they are, rather than where the instructor expects them to be; opportunities that are flexible, acknowledge different situations, and help students grow as individuals. As our participants shared, offering empathetic feedback can take many forms. One participant spoke of finding opportunities to "show students that their voice and style of writing/speaking is valid." Another participant shared how they changed their feedback delivery method: "after hearing that students do not like feedback written in red pen, I have used colors intentionally like purple or green and also give smiley faces when people do well and write encouraging notes." For another, being sensitive to students' identities meant that they would "often give feedback in their [the student's] language." For one participant, feedback "demonstrates to each student that he/she/they are valued and belong to the community at my institution."

Empathetic, identity-sensitive feedback builds trust by making students feel heard, seen, welcomed, and valued in classroom communities. Tailoring feedback to acknowledge students' individual needs and situations demonstrates care for their learning and growth. Participants

described strategies they employed to boost student confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging, while bridging gaps between student and academic identities. Overall, feedback rooted in empathy and sensitivity to student identities fostered inclusive classroom environments.

Communicating high expectations

Participants expressed a diversity of perspectives around the type of expectations they held for students—with many participants holding both transactional and aspirational expectations for how students would engage. Some participants described how attempting to establish trustful feedback conditions articulated high expectations on how students would use the feedback. This aligns with Carless's suggestion that feedback that facilitates dialogic trust is often "establishing high expectations" so that "students are pushed to fulfil their potential" (2013, 101). For our participants, establishing high expectations seemed connected directly to students engaging in feedback as a process, rather than as a transaction, as illustrated by one participant: "[students'] responsibility is to engage in this process" of using feedback to "identify any misconceptions that may have lead [sic] their problem-solving process astray."

In our study, there was a common refrain amongst our participants that they seemed uncertain about how to ensure student engagement with the feedback; frequently they used words like "hope" or "wish" as they shared their desire that students would communicate with them on the feedback, reflect on the feedback, and incorporate it into future work. Perhaps this explains why, when it came to their expectations of how students would use feedback received, many participants expressed expectations that appeared straightforward and often a bit transactional in nature (i.e., used primarily for corrections or to make changes according to instructor demands). This can be seen in participant responses such as: "Once I provide [feedback], I expect [students] to use it to learn, and to follow up if they need additional help" and "Students should learn from the feedback and seek to improve." Still other participants seemed to set aside even these basic expectations. One participant wrote: "I expect them to read [the feedback] but they don't read the comments." Another said that they "see [students] crumble their papers and jam them into their backpacks. I doubt that people read the feedback at all."

Establishing high expectations also included students taking "charge of the revision work that they need to do" instead of just correcting errors. Many participants stated that they expected students to not just use feedback to improve on one task but to "think about it with a growth mindset" and apply it to improve their learning beyond the assignment and course. Ultimately, for our participants who described explicitly communicating high expectations of what their students would do with feedback, the common factor seemed to be the expectation that students would become willing, purposeful, and authentic members of the dialogue that feedback can produce. Or, as one participant argued, "My students' responsibility is to question me and to fully understand and dialogue with me on points of disagreement."

While some instructors have minimal expectations (i.e, that students will simply read feedback), those seeking dialogue and trust will establish high expectations for engagement. They expect students to deeply engage with feedback, incorporate it into future work, and join the instructor as authentic partners in the learning process. Setting explicit high expectations signals instructors' belief and trust in students' potential and pushes them to fulfill it. Establishing these high standards makes students active agents in using feedback to improve, rather than being passive recipients who are checking off a transaction.

Promoting student self-evaluation

In our study, many participants clearly specified that it was the students' responsibility to engage with the feedback; however, there emerged two distinctive approaches to students' autonomy to use (or not use) the feedback. As one participant explained, one way to do this focuses on helping students learn how to articulate their needs: "I coach them out loud on how to ask for what they want for feedback, it's a lesson in that as much as a lesson in making revisions." Many study participants' approaches align with Curzon-Hobson's (2002) approach to establishing trust with students not only "through the provision of freedom and encouragement" but also in how the teacher continually "directs the learning process" to "create depth, direction and rigor" (270). Other participants expressed their beliefs that they did not "have any responsibility towards what the student does with my feedback [as] they are adults, and they decide what to do with their adult lives." Still others saw students' freedom to use (or not use) the feedback as an opportunity to encourage student agency and careful deliberation. Several instructors shared how they empowered students to feel free to decide whether or not they would incorporate—or, when necessary, discard—feedback so that it best suited their learning and project goals. As one participant said:

> I tell the students that my feedback is meant to get them to think more carefully about the choices they have made in their task, and to be intentional in the choices they make to create the communicative impact they want. They may not take my suggestions on board, but if the outcome of their performance meets the requirements of the task, then all is good.

Another participant echoed this mentality when they shared: "I see [feedback] as a conversation and guidance to be used collaboratively. Ultimately, I think the feedback is for the student to use or not as they see it relating to their goals for the assignment." Still another described the process of dedicating learning time to:

> Discuss[ing] ways that authors can address feedback: accepting recommendations as-is, considering and creating alternative pathways based on feedback, applying recommendations to alternate parts of a draft and/or to an upcoming project, or setting recommendations (including my own) aside as not aligned with the author's goal.

What distinguishes feedback that is more transactional from feedback that enables agency and efficacy? Carless (2013) suggests "promoting student self-evaluation" (101) is an important factor for facilitating dialogic trust, wherein students share responsibility for the evaluation of and reflection on how to use feedback for improvement. While not all of the participants' feedback practices that we coded as enabling student agency and efficacy incorporated self-evaluation, many shared their expectations that the students would use the feedback to develop as learners and students. For some of our participants this self-evaluation manifested in an actual task. As one participant noted, "I ask them to write a response to the feedback or to reflect on their revision process after receiving feedback." Another explained that they "dedicate time at the beginning of the next class after assignments are marked to going through the feedback . . . asking students to identify what they will do differently in their next assignment as a result of the feedback from this one."

The conditions for creating trustful feedback that enables student agency and efficacy include clarity and guidance on how to evaluate feedback and their own individual learning journeys, as well as implicit communication about students' responsibilities to incorporate feedback into their work.

Instructors in our study placed a strong emphasis on the need for students to take an active role in the feedback practice so that they might, through self-evaluation, be responsible for their own learning. As one participant explained:

> I am responsible for feedback. They are responsible to each other to give feedback. They are responsible to be critical of their own work/drafts. They are responsible for applying that feedback and are key drivers of their own learning (setting goals for themselves as to how they want to learn and improve).

One action employed by several participants was an attempt to invite students to not just consider feedback given, but to engage in a meta-analysis on the role of feedback. One participant shared that "I often ask students to reflect on what feedback (mine, their peers, and the writing consultants [usually peers]) was most helpful to them and why." For another participant, this meta-analysis involved connecting former and current students:

> I ask previous year students to come and talk to current year students about how to evaluate feedback and give feedback. I also include a lot of opportunities for formative peer feedback, not just instructor feedback. I also ask students to submit drafts on which formative feedback is provided by peers and myself and when they submit the final assignment, they have to indicate how they responded to the feedback on the draft.

By promoting self-evaluation, instructors foster students' abilities to interpret and selectively apply suggestions that meet their own learning goals. Participants described how their explicit expectations that students will use feedback for self-improvement cultivated student responsibility in the learning process.

DISCUSSION

The six themes we identified from our analysis of participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions reveal critical elements for building feedback processes grounded in trust. As discussed earlier, some of these themes addressed specific actions for providing feedback, while other themes highlighted the context or environment in which this feedback could be offered. Table 4 below provides a summary of these six themes.

Table 4. Trust-feedback themes

Theme	Summary
Positive non-judgment	Classroom environment is supportive, respectful, and formative such that it encourages and builds students' self-efficacy, without making them feel criticised or devalued; feedback focuses on improvement-oriented actions rather than judgment of student work.
Inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence	Classroom environment focuses on how individual effort contributes to the success of the entire group/team; one goal of feedback is to bring people together to build a classroom community where every student feels valued and that they belong.

Dialogue and discussion	Classroom environment emphasises the dialogic nature of feedback where instructors ensure that their feedback is received and that students can voice their concerns about their learning and share their initial reactions to feedback.
Showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities	Instructors craft feedback that shows awareness of–and consideration towards–students' individual needs, challenges, and potential vulnerabilities (like depression or anxiety); an effort is made to frame comments in an encouraging, supportive manner that accounts for students' emotional/social well-being.
Communicating high expectations	Instructors convey to students through feedback that they are capable of meeting challenging standards and achieving at high levels; constructive guidance clarifies how students can reach these elevated goals.
Promoting student self-evaluation	Instructors frame feedback in a way that encourages students to critically reflect on their own work and to identify areas for self-improvement so that students may develop the ability to evaluate and enhance their own performance over time.

The themes of positive non-judgment; inclusion, community, and constructive interdependence; and dialogue and discussion all describe the foundational pieces of the classroom environment that instructors cultivate and form; in other words, these are "relationship-building learning environment conditions" that instructors and students must establish and maintain for the duration of the course (and sometimes longer) in order for trust to gain hold. On the other hand, the themes of showing empathy and sensitivity to student identities, communicating high expectations, and promoting student self-evaluation refer to more specific actions taken by the instructor; these are the agency-developing feedback practices that instructors should implement as part of their larger efforts to build relationships with students centred on feedback and grounded in trust.

Relationship-building learning environment conditions do not spontaneously occur; rather instructors must proactively work to develop these conditions throughout the duration of the course or for the length of the relationship with the student. These conditions establish a baseline of expectations for the learning environment, rather than being specific to one instance of feedback. A learning environment grounded in relationships requires a reciprocal and ongoing cycle of trust and feedback (Felten and Lambert 2020; Xu and Carless 2017; Yang and Carless 2013). By consciously directing attention to students' accomplishments and providing affirming feedback, student self-efficacy is bolstered, thereby engendering an inclusive atmosphere conducive to open discussions and non-judgmental exchanges. By proactively reaching out to underperforming students and engaging in personal discussions aimed at understanding students' individual learning needs, educators can forge meaningful connections and cultivate an environment where students feel recognized and embraced. Within this framework, valuing community and collaboration is a critical condition for nurturing trusting relationships (Felten and Lambert 2020). Feedback sessions—opportunities for instructors to provide feedback to students one-on-one, in small groups, or as a whole class—envisioned as dialogues rather than unidirectional exchanges, further build inclusive learning experiences by granting students agency in their own learning (Carless 2013). Through active participation, students voice their concerns, share initial reactions to feedback, and contribute to the collective knowledge-construction process.

In parallel to, and interweaving with, these learning environment conditions are a set of agency-developing instructor feedback practices that serve to cultivate trust. These practices are

intentional behaviours modelled by the instructors—and then, ideally, internalised by the students—that emphasise the value and importance of the student in the feedback process. Displaying empathy and sensitivity to student identities fosters a supportive milieu by acknowledging the prevalence of stress and by allowing feedback to be framed in positive and formative terms. Communicating high expectations represents another essential practice that facilitates student agency (Griffiths, Murdock-Perriera, and Eberhardt 2023). By teaching students how to solicit targeted feedback and encouraging students to integrate feedback with existing knowledge, educators propel students towards self-evaluation and continuous improvement. Promoting student self-evaluation completes the cycle because it fosters active engagement with feedback and cultivates a feedback culture that nurtures a robust learning community (Carless 2013). Students are expected not only to incorporate feedback into their revisions, but also to engage in reflective practices and behaviours by composing revision memos and cover letters that critically assess their feedback and its integration into subsequent drafts. This process of teaching students how to ask for and use feedback instils self-reflection, metacognitive awareness, and a sense of responsibility for one's own learning.

DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK OF BUILDING TRUST THROUGH FEEDBACK

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the interactions among the six themes situated within relationship-building learning environment conditions and agency-developing feedback practices. We chose a helix to represent the interplay that exists between these three practices and three conditions, because it represents how the practices and conditions intersect in three-dimensional spaces. Separately, each strand offers the potential for powerful and meaningful learning; however, it is through a careful weaving together of both the conditions and the practices that the instructor is able to build a robust sense of trust through feedback. The swirling appearance of the helix serves to highlight our assertion that there is no singular entry point into this type of trustful feedback, and there is no hierarchy amongst the conditions or the practices. Rather, each condition and practice are equally important elements in this framework. Just as there is no singular entry point or foundational theme that must first be produced, there is no exit point or final step for completion. Our framework reflects the cyclical, ongoing nature of this work, as the instructor must continuously establish the "relationship-building environment conditions" and engage in the "agency-developing feedback practices" so that the initially built trust can be maintained and developed through further feedback interactions.

Figure 1: Framework for building trust through feedback
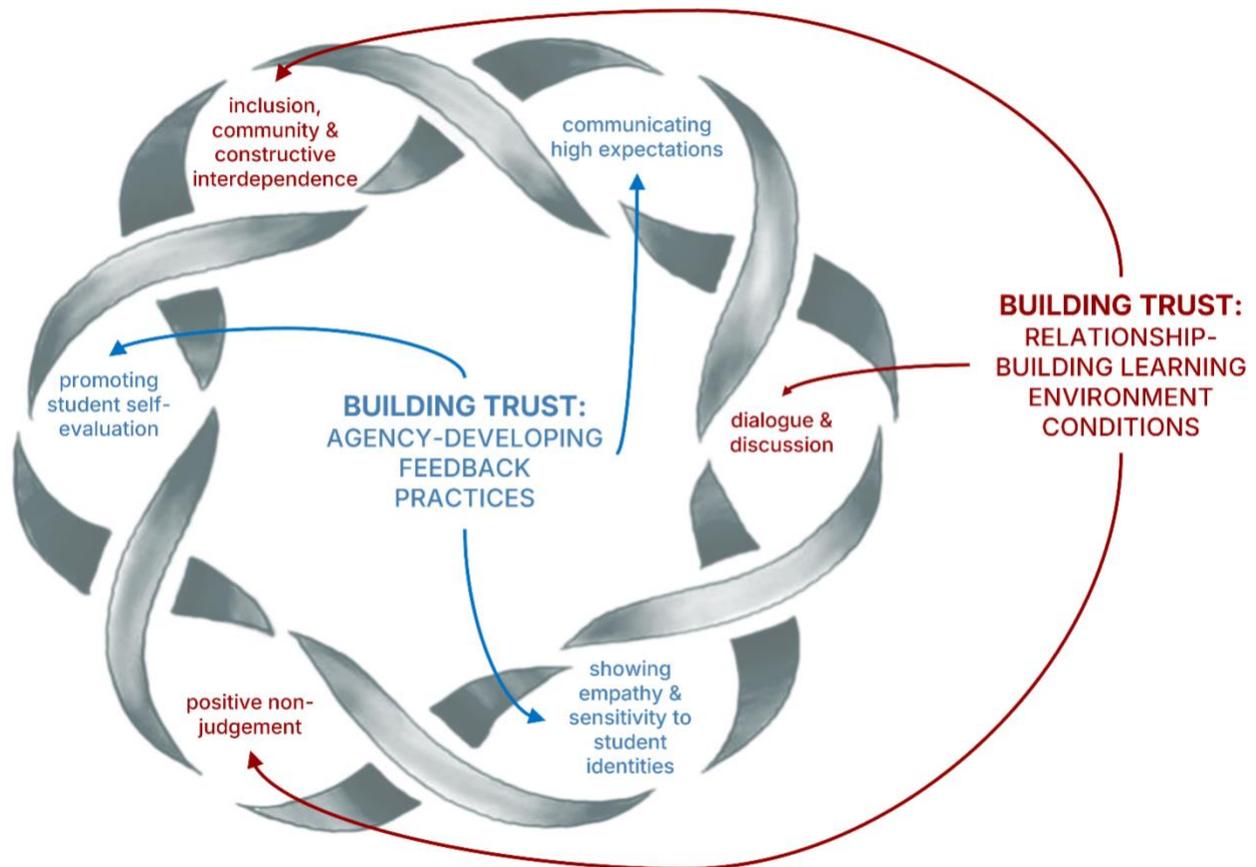
LIMITATIONS

Research that relies on participant responses to open-ended survey questions has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, participants who choose to respond to open-ended survey questions may not be fully representative of the larger population. Secondly, relying solely on responses to open-ended questions means that we were not able to probe participant responses with follow-up questions, as we would have done in a live interview or through focus groups. Future research addressing data about participant discipline and/or type and size of courses taught is planned so that we might dive deeper into participant demographics and possible connections to their feedback beliefs and perceptions.

CONCLUSIONS

The rich data we collected from the participants' responses to the four open-ended questions provided powerful insight on how trust is built within higher education classrooms, specifically through the feedback processes in which instructors and students engage. Based on our analysis, we aimed to create a framework that effectively represents the intricate relationship between feedback practice and the learning environment, with the goal of assisting instructors and students as they engage with feedback processes that cultivate trust. Our framework for *Building Trust through Feedback* emerged from these rich data, positing a reinforcing and recursive relationship between a set of relationship-building learning environment conditions and agency-developing feedback practices. These conditions and practices work in meaningful symbiosis with each other and prioritise constructive feedback, collaboration, inclusivity, and student empowerment.

By implementing these practices and fostering these learning conditions, instructors can create both feedback processes and a learning environment centred on developing trusting relationships and instilling agency in students. Building such a learning experience is essential for fostering a positive and impactful educational journey that promotes student growth and success. We envision this as a helpful framework that can inform instructor feedback practices and behaviours, and also to contribute to the growth of both instructor and student feedback literacies. While the framework almost exclusively addresses what instructors do in terms of environmental conditions and practices, other scholars are exploring student feedback literacy and student feedback beliefs and practices (e.g., Yan and Carless 2022). We hope that future research will not only continue to examine the student side of building trust through feedback but also seek to bridge the instructor and student sides of this equation.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Breana Bayraktar (USA) is an educational developer with the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning and affiliate faculty with the Higher Education Program at George Mason University, where she specializes in blended learning/hybrid pedagogy and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Dr. Kiruthika Ragupathi (SGP) is a senior associate director at the National University of Singapore, leading professional development initiatives at the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. Her work focuses on supporting individual professional/personal growth and fostering collaborative opportunities that address strategic university needs.

Katherine A. Troyer, PhD, (USA) is the director of The Collaborative for Learning and Teaching at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Her work in faculty development focuses heavily on how to support faculty during key liminal periods, and her horror scholarship explores how the genre breaks identities, bodies, and the places we inhabit.

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