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Assessment Feedback and Student Learning in History Education: Reflections from a Teacher Educator and Academic Developer in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Background: Assessment feedback is commonly understood as a means of helping students recognise gaps in their knowledge and improve their learning. However, feedback can also provide evidence through which educators critically reflect on their teaching and assessment practices.
Objective: This article explores assessment feedback as a reflective practice through the complementary perspectives of a History teacher educator and an Academic Developer. The inquiry emerged from an academic development engagement discourse on reflective practice that prompted these authors to critically analyse the notion and practice of assessment and feedback practices within undergraduate History Education.
Methods: Using a self-study methodology supported by collaborative reflective inquiry, the article draws on reflective narratives of significant assessment-feedback experiences and collaborative dialogue between the authors. The narratives are structurally analysed using Labov's narrative framework and interpreted through Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.
Results: The analysis highlights three interconnected shifts: recognising the gap between possessing and applying disciplinary knowledge; creating dialogue through assessment feedback; and turning evidence arising from students' assessment experiences back onto teaching practice.
Conclusion: The findings suggest feedback can operate reciprocally: students use feedback to make sense and improve their learning, while educators use students' questions, difficulties and responses as evidence for critically reconsidering their pedagogical practices. The article argues that conceptualising assessment feedback as reciprocal reflective practice can strengthen student learning while creating opportunities for evidence-informed educator professional learning and Academic Development.
Unique Contribution: This self-study fills a gap by providing insights into the essence of assessment feedback and how it impacts students' learning outcomes, particularly in higher education settings.

Keywords: Assessment feedback; reflective practice; self-study; academic development; student learning; teacher education; History Education

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment occupies a central place in teaching and learning in higher education, and through it, students' and educators' effectiveness, efficiency and performance can be gauged. Brown and Knight (1994) describe assessment as being "at the heart of the student experience" (p. 1), while Boud and Falchikov (2006) emphasise its role in shaping learning beyond the immediate assessment event. Central to this developmental role is feedback. Carless and Boud (2018) conceptualise feedback as a process through which learners make sense of information and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies. This understanding positions students as active participants who interpret and act on feedback rather than merely receiving it. Effective feedback therefore depends on students' sensemaking, agency, and capacity to use the information provided (Ryan et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in teacher education, where students must develop disciplinary knowledge while learning to translate that knowledge into pedagogical practice. In History Education, student teachers engage with disciplinary knowledge, interpretation, curriculum requirements, and debates about the relevance of History (Cairns & Garrard, 2024). Constructive alignment further requires coherence between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The concern underpinning this article emerged from observing that students may demonstrate familiarity with historical content while experiencing difficulty applying that knowledge in assessment and teaching contexts.

Assessment feedback, however, need not be confined to what students learn from educators. Students' responses, questions, misconceptions and engagement with feedback can also provide evidence through which educators interrogate their own practice (Brooks et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2026). Schön's (1983) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are useful in understanding how experiences arising from practice can prompt both immediate pedagogical responses and retrospective reconsideration of teaching and assessment decisions. Viewed in this way, assessment feedback creates possibilities for both student and educator reflection in professional learning.

The impetus for this article emerged from an academic development engagement on being a reflective higher education practitioner, which prompted the teacher educator to reconsider his assessment and feedback practices in undergraduate History Education. Subsequent dialogue with an Academic Developer brought together two complementary perspectives: situated disciplinary practice and an Academic Development perspective concerned with evidence-informed reflection and pedagogical enhancement. This collaborative engagement prompted a broader consideration of how assessment-feedback experiences might become a resource for reflecting on both student learning and teaching practice.

Assessment feedback is widely recognised as important for student learning, particularly when students are able to interpret and use it (Carless & Boud, 2018; Ryan et al., 2024). Yet feedback is often discussed primarily in terms of what it provides to students, with less attention to what educators may learn from students' assessment performance, questions and responses to feedback. In the History Education context considered herein, difficulties in interpreting

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assessment expectations and applying disciplinary knowledge raised questions not only about student understanding, but also about the clarity of assessment tasks, preparation for assessment and the effectiveness of feedback practices. Against this background, the article asks: How can engagement with assessment feedback foster reflective teaching practice and enhance student learning in higher education?

The objectives were to:

1. Explore how assessment feedback supports students' engagement with and understanding of learning in undergraduate History Education;
2. Examine how assessment experiences and feedback can stimulate educator reflection on teaching and assessment practice; and
3. Explore how an Academic Development perspective can support the use of assessment feedback as a resource for reflective practice and pedagogical enhancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is two-fold. First, it examines assessment feedback as a developmental and dialogic process that supports student learning, agency and engagement. Second, it considers the relationship between assessment feedback and reflective practice, focusing on how evidence arising from students' assessment experiences can prompt educators to critically examine their teaching and assessment practices. Together, these strands establish the scholarly basis for exploring the relationship between feedback, student learning and educator reflection.

Assessment Feedback as a Developmental and Dialogic Process

Contemporary approaches increasingly position assessment as part of learning rather than solely as a mechanism for measuring achievement. In the South African higher education context, Dison and Padayachee (2022) argue for assessment practices that bring assessment of and for learning into closer relationship; feedback is central to this developmental orientation because it can help students recognise gaps, make judgements about their work and take action in subsequent learning.

Carless and Boud's (2018) concept of feedback literacy emphasises the understandings, capacities and dispositions students need to appreciate feedback, make judgements, manage affect and take action. This shifts attention from the quantity of comments provided by an educator to what students are able to do with feedback. Ryan et al. (2024) similarly show that feedback is more useful when academic intent and student sensemaking are aligned. A dialogic approach extends this understanding by creating opportunities for students to ask questions, articulate uncertainty, and negotiate assessment expectations (Crimmins et al., 2016). Student voice scholarship likewise highlights the potential of assessment and feedback processes to inform both student experience and teaching practice (Sun et al., 2023).

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Assessment Feedback as a Resource for Reflective Practice

While feedback scholarship often focuses on student learning, assessment evidence can also support educator learning (Kavaklı & Kızıltaş, 2026). Recurring misconceptions, questions, and difficulties may reveal aspects of teaching, curriculum, or assessment design needing reconsideration, making feedback a source of evidence for examining pedagogical decisions.

This connects to reflective practice: Schön (1983) distinguishes reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action, and within Academic Development, reflective practice involves critically analysing teaching to enhance student learning (Feixas et al., 2020). Together, these strands suggest assessment feedback matters for both students and educators. Students use feedback to improve their learning, while educators examine what students' assessment experiences reveal about practice, including alignment among intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Conceptual Framework: Reflective Practice

This article is conceptually informed by Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice. Schön challenges the view of professional practice as the straightforward application of technical knowledge, arguing that complex and uncertain situations require practitioners to interpret experience, question assumptions, and reconsider action. Central to the framework are reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to thinking about and adjusting practice while it is unfolding, whereas reflection-on-action involves revisiting an experience retrospectively to consider what occurred, why it occurred and what might be done differently. In the context of assessment feedback, an educator may respond immediately when students misunderstand an expectation and later reconsider whether the difficulty relates to student understanding, assessment design, teaching activities or feedback practices. The framework therefore enables students' responses and feedback encounters to be considered as potential evidence about teaching and assessment practice. For the teacher educator, this involves critically examining situated experiences within History Education, while the Academic Developer facilitates critical engagement with those experiences from a developmental perspective. The interaction between these perspectives creates opportunities to move from describing practice towards critically interrogating it.

Schön's framework provides the interpretive lens through which the reflective accounts are examined, with particular attention to what prompted reflection, how the teacher educator responded, what assumptions were subsequently questioned, and how collaborative engagement contributed to the reconsideration of practice. To address the study's overarching research question, "How can engagement with assessment feedback foster reflective teaching practice and enhance student learning in higher education?", a self-study methodology supported by collaborative reflective inquiry was adopted. As discussed in the methodology, Labov's structural narrative analysis is used to organise and examine the reflective narratives, while Schön's framework supports interpretation of the reflection and professional learning arising from these experiences.

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METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted to explore assessment feedback as a site for reflective teaching practice and student learning. It describes the self-study design and collaborative nature of the inquiry, the authors' positionalities, the sources of evidence, and the processes used to generate and analyze the reflective narratives. Attention is also given to reflexivity, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations to enhance transparency in how interpretations of practice were developed.

Research Approach: Self-Study

This article adopts a self-study methodology to examine assessment feedback as a site for reflective teaching practice and student learning. Self-study involves systematic investigation of one's own professional practice for deeper understanding and improvement (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011). It is particularly established in teacher education and extends beyond personal reflection by requiring critical interrogation, evidence, and interaction with alternative perspectives. The inquiry originated in the teacher educator's questioning of his assessment and feedback practices following an academic development engagement on reflective practice. Although his practice is the primary focus, the inquiry is collaborative. The Academic Developer acts as a critical collaborative partner, bringing an Academic Development perspective to questions about reflection, teaching, assessment, feedback, and student learning (Samaras, 2011).

Context and Positionality

The self-study is situated in undergraduate History Education in a South African higher education context. The first author is the teacher educator whose practice is being examined and interpreted. The second author is an Academic Developer whose practice includes facilitating critical reflection on teaching and evidence-informed pedagogical enhancement. These positions are made explicit and treated as complementary resources for inquiry rather than neutral standpoints.

Sources of Evidence and Reflective Process

The primary evidence comprises reflective narratives of significant assessment-feedback experiences in the teacher educator's practice, particularly episodes involving uncertainty or questions about students' interpretation of assessment expectations and application of disciplinary knowledge. The narratives are revisited through structured conversations between the teacher educator and Academic Developer. Relevant pedagogical artefacts, such as assessment tasks, learning outcomes, criteria and feedback practices, may be used where they directly contextualise the selected episodes. The reflective process is informed by Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Collaborative questioning is used to challenge initial interpretations and consider alternative explanations, including the clarity of assessment expectations, teaching and learning opportunities, feedback practices and constructive alignment. The purpose is not to prescribe disciplinary solutions, but to move from description towards critical interrogation of practice.

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Analysis of Reflective Narratives

The narratives are analysed through structural narrative analysis and reflective interpretation. Labov's approach is used to examine how significant experiences are organised and given meaning through the elements of abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This establishes what happened, why it was significant, and how the practitioner reconstructs the experience. Schön's (1983) framework provides the second analytical layer, focusing on moments of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and on what these reveal about professional learning. Collaborative dialogue with the Academic Developer adds an interpretive layer by questioning initial assumptions and considering alternative explanations. Thus, Labov structures the reflective narratives, while Schön supports interpretation of their implications for professional learning and pedagogical change.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity and Ethics

Trustworthiness is supported through collaborative questioning of the teacher educator's interpretations and, where available, the use of relevant pedagogical artefacts alongside reflective narratives. Reflexivity is important because both authors are implicated in the inquiry: the teacher educator's interpretations are shaped by situated disciplinary experience, while the Academic Developer's questions are informed by an Academic Development orientation towards reflection and enhancement. The study focuses on the teacher educator's professional practice rather than on students as research participants. No individual student is identified, and classroom experiences are represented in ways that protect anonymity. The analytical emphasis remains on interrogating educator practice rather than locating the problem within students.

Reflecting on Assessment Feedback in History Education

The analysis of the reflective narratives revealed three interconnected episodes that became significant in the teacher educator's reconsideration of assessment feedback practice: (1) recognising the gap between knowing and applying disciplinary knowledge; (2) creating dialogue through assessment feedback; and (3) turning feedback back onto teaching practice. Guided by Labov's (1972) structural analysis, each episode is reconstructed through its context, complicating action, significance, response, and retrospective meaning. Schön's (1983) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are then used to interpret what each episode reveals about the teacher educator's professional learning. The Academic Developer's collaborative questioning provides an additional reflective layer through which initial assumptions are interrogated and alternative interpretations considered.

Reflective Episode 1: From Knowing History to Applying Historical Knowledge

The first reflective episode emerged from a recurring experience in the teaching and assessment of undergraduate History Education. Students appeared to possess relevant historical information and could engage with content during teaching, yet this knowledge was not always demonstrated effectively when they were required to apply it in assessment.

Reflecting on this experience, the teacher educator recalled:

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> "What troubled me was that I could see that some students knew the content. When we discussed it in class, they could talk about it, but when they had to use that knowledge in an assessment, something seemed to get lost. Initially, I thought they simply did not understand the question. I realised it is a challenge of translating theory into practical context"

Within Labov's (1972) structure, the undergraduate History Education assessment context provides the orientation, while the disjuncture between students' apparent knowledge and their ability to demonstrate that knowledge constitutes the complicating action. The significance of the experience on the evaluation lies in the teacher educator's growing uncertainty about his initial explanation of the problem.

The collaborative conversation with the Academic Developer introduced a different question:

What if the difficulty is not only about what students know, but also about how they have been prepared to demonstrate that knowledge?

This prompted consideration of the relationship between the intended learning outcomes, classroom learning activities and assessment tasks.

The teacher educator reflected:

> "That question made me view assessment differently. I had been asking why the students were not applying what they had learnt. I had not really asked whether my teaching activities had given them enough opportunity to practise the kind of application I expected in the assessment. That is when I realised they separate micro-teaching and SBL, yet the two co-exist in every form and type of assessment. Any form of teaching is guided by theory and content taught in the classrooms…"

This was a key moment of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Assessment results became evidence for reconsidering the educator's own pedagogical assumptions, raising questions through constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) about whether students had enough opportunities to practise the interpretation and application required in assessment. The resolution lay not in explaining students' difficulties but in changing the question by shifting from locating the problem solely with students to examining the relationship between teaching, learning outcomes, and assessment expectations.

"Why are they not applying what they know?" to *"What in my teaching and assessment practice might enable or constrain their ability to apply what they know?"*

Reflective Episode 2: Creating Dialogue Through Assessment Feedback

The second episode concerned what happened after assessment. The teacher educator had become increasingly concerned that returning assessed work did not necessarily resolve students' questions or misunderstandings. Feedback therefore began to be incorporated into opportunities for students to revisit their work, discuss difficulties, and engage with one another's contributions during formative activities.

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He reflects:

> "I realised that giving students their marks and explaining where they went wrong was not necessarily feedback. Some still had questions. I needed to create space for them to come back to the assessment, ask why an answer did not work and hear how other students approached the same issue."

Here, the complicating action was realizing that comments or marks didn't guarantee students understood the feedback. The educator responded by creating more dialogic assessment opportunities, including discussion and peer interrogation.

This shift aligns with Carless and Boud's (2018) view of feedback as a process where students make sense of information and use it to improve learning. It also became a site of reflection-in-action for the teacher educator, since feedback discussions sometimes demanded immediate clarification, alternative explanations, or further questioning rather than a predetermined response. The teacher educator's retrospective reflection captures this change:

> "The feedback session also became feedback to me. When several students asked similar questions, I started thinking perhaps this is telling me something. Maybe I need to revisit how I taught this concept or how I framed the assessment question."

The coda of this episode therefore extends beyond the recognition that students need opportunities to engage with feedback. It marks the beginning of a reciprocal understanding of feedback: students use feedback to reconsider their learning, while their questions and responses provide the educator with information about his own teaching.

Reflective Episode 3: Turning Feedback Back onto Teaching Practice

The third episode marks the most significant conceptual shift. Through collaborative reflection, the teacher educator began to see assessment feedback not only as something he gave students but also as evidence for examining his own practice.

Here, the Academic Developer challenged interpretations that blamed recurring assessment difficulties mainly on students. Collaborative questioning explored whether patterns in student responses might instead signal issues with assessment design, clarity of expectations, learning opportunities, feedback practices, or constructive alignment. The teacher educator reflects:

> "I started this reflection thinking mainly about how I could give students better feedback. What changed for me was realising that their work was also giving feedback to me. Their mistakes, their questions and even the things they repeatedly struggled with were telling me something about my own practice."

This reflection represents a movement from feedback as transmission towards feedback as reciprocal learning. Through Schön's (1983) reflection-on-action, student assessment

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experiences became a stimulus for interrogating assumptions about teaching and learning. The Academic Development perspective did not provide disciplinary answers to History Education challenges. Rather, it introduced questions that created distance between the practitioner and his initial interpretation of the experience. In this sense, collaborative inquiry functioned as a means of making familiar practice open to scrutiny.

The teacher educator captured this shift as follows:

> "I now ask a different question when students struggle. I still ask what they need to do differently, but I also ask: what do I need to look at differently in my teaching, my assessment or the feedback I provide?"

This constitutes the coda of the reflective journey. Assessment feedback becomes neither solely student-centred nor educator-centred, but a space in which both forms of learning can occur. The teacher educator's journey across the three episodes can therefore be understood as a movement from identifying student difficulty, to creating dialogue around feedback, to recognising student assessment experiences as evidence for reflection on teaching practice.

DISCUSSION

Assessment Feedback as Reciprocal Learning

The reflective episodes suggest that assessment feedback's educational value goes beyond informing students about their performance. Across the self-study, feedback emerged as reciprocal: students were supported to make sense of their learning, while the teacher educator used students' assessment experiences, questions, and responses as evidence for reflecting on his own practice. This reciprocity answers the study's overarching question of how engagement with assessment feedback can foster reflective teaching and enhance student learning.

The first reflective episode highlights an important distinction between possessing disciplinary knowledge and being able to demonstrate or apply that knowledge in assessment. Initially, difficulties in application could be interpreted primarily as shortcomings in students' understanding. Collaborative reflection, however, prompted consideration of whether these difficulties might also reveal something about the relationship between teaching, learning activities and assessment expectations. This resonates with Biggs and Tang's (2011) principle of constructive alignment, which requires coherence between what students are expected to learn, the opportunities provided for them to develop that learning and how learning is assessed. From this perspective, students' assessment performance becomes more than evidence of achievement; it can also provide educators with information about the effectiveness and alignment of their own pedagogical decisions.

The second episode demonstrated that the developmental potential of feedback depends on opportunities for students to engage with, interpret and act on it. Simply returning marks or comments does not necessarily result in learning. Carless and Boud's (2018) concept of feedback

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literacy similarly shifts attention from the provision of feedback towards students' capacities to appreciate feedback, make judgements and take action. Ryan et al. (2024) further emphasise the importance of alignment between educators' feedback intentions and students' sensemaking. The reflective experience in this study reinforces this position: feedback became more educationally meaningful when students were able to revisit assessment, ask questions and participate in dialogue around their learning.

These dialogic encounters also generated information for the educator. When students raised similar questions or repeatedly encountered difficulties, their responses prompted the teacher educator to reconsider explanations, assessment expectations, and teaching approaches. Feedback thus began to operate in two directions: students received information to support their learning, while their engagement generated information to support educator learning. This extends feedback beyond a conventional transmission model, positioning it as a relational and dialogic process.

Schön's (1983) reflective practice framework helps explain how this reciprocal learning occurs. During feedback encounters, student questions or unexpected responses may prompt reflection-in-action, requiring the educator to reconsider an explanation or pedagogical response while practice is unfolding. The same experiences can subsequently become objects of reflection-on-action, as the educator revisits what happened and questions the assumptions underpinning teaching, assessment and feedback decisions. Assessment feedback therefore provides both an immediate and retrospective stimulus for professional learning.

The third reflective episode illustrates a particularly important shift in the teacher educator's understanding of feedback: from asking primarily *"What do students need to do differently?"* towards also asking *"What does their experience require me to reconsider in my own practice?"* This does not remove students' responsibility for engaging actively with their learning. Rather, it broadens responsibility by recognising that learning occurs within pedagogical and assessment environments that educators themselves design. A reflective orientation therefore resists locating recurring assessment difficulties exclusively within students and instead considers what those difficulties might reveal about teaching, assessment design, learning opportunities and feedback practices.

The collaborative relationship between the teacher educator and Academic Developer enabled this shift. Rather than offering disciplinary solutions, the Academic Developer created a critical space to question taken-for-granted interpretations. This highlights Academic Development's role in helping educators move beyond collecting or providing feedback toward making pedagogical meaning from evidence of student learning, facilitating the shift from individual reflection to critically interrogated reflection that informs professional learning and pedagogical enhancement.

The findings suggest assessment feedback is part of a continuing reflective cycle rather than the final stage of assessment: students engage with assessment and feedback; their responses

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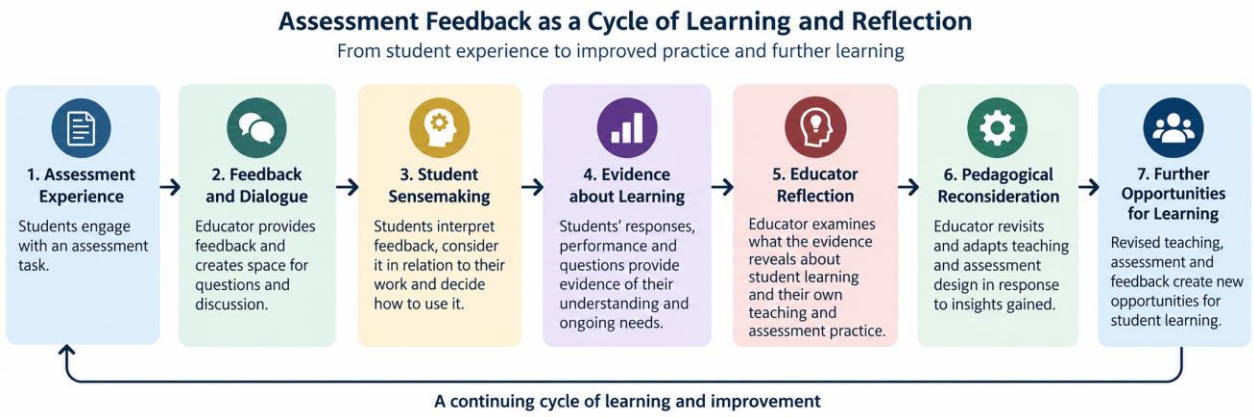
generate evidence about learning. Teacher educators interpret that evidence through reflection, and the resulting insights inform subsequent teaching, assessment and feedback practices as:



Assessment feedback, viewed through this reciprocal lens, becomes more than something educators give to students. It becomes a space in which both students and educators can learn: students through making sense of and acting on information about their learning, and educators through critically engaging with what students' learning experiences reveal about teaching and assessment practice.

Implications for Teaching and Academic Development

The findings suggest that in higher education, feedback should be part of an ongoing learning process rather than the conclusion of assessment. Educators should create opportunities for students to revisit tasks, ask questions, and apply feedback, while using patterns in student responses as evidence to reconsider their own teaching and assessment practices.

The study also emphasizes deliberate reflective practice: reflection doesn't arise automatically from providing feedback or observing performance, and Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action helps frame both immediate and subsequent responses. For Academic Development, this points to a role beyond workshops and technical guidance creating structured spaces for academics to critically engage with evidence from their own teaching.

Through collaborative reflection and critical questioning, Academic Development can support educators to move from asking only, "*How can students improve?"* towards also considering "*What can this evidence teach me about my own practice?"* Such an approach positions Academic Development as a facilitator of reflective, evidence-informed professional learning while respecting the disciplinary expertise and contextual knowledge of the academic practitioner.

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CONCLUSION

This study shows that assessment feedback, when approached reflectively and dialogically, can foster both reflective teaching and student learning. It highlights a shift from blaming students for assessment difficulties toward using their questions, misconceptions, and responses as evidence for reflecting on teaching, assessment, and feedback practices.

Collaborative reflection with an Academic Developer helped the teacher educator question taken-for-granted assumptions, showing how Academic Development can support evidence-informed professional learning. Ultimately, the study argues for understanding feedback as reciprocal reflective practice as an ongoing dialogue between student learning, educator reflection, and pedagogical change.

Ethical clearance
The study complied with all applicable ethical requirements and guidelines.

Sources of funding
The study was not funded.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions
Malesela Maepa and Mbali Mohlakoana conceived the study, including the design. Malesela Maepa and Mbali Mohlakoana collated the data, and handled the analysis and interpretation. Malesela Maepa wrote the initial manuscript. Both authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Data availability statement
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. However, access to the qualitative data may be restricted to protect participants' confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, in accordance with the ethical considerations governing the study.

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