

# University lecturers' emotional responses to and coping with student feedback: a Finnish case study

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**Abstract** Lecturers often find themselves unable to appropriately interpret or deal with student feedback, which may consequently be essential to how they feel about teaching and students. Research into lecturers' emotional responses to student feedback is scarce, despite the growing use of student feedback as a means of evaluating teachers' work. This narrative study explores seven lecturers' responses to student feedback. The lecturers had prior to the study participated in pedagogical training aimed at developing a deep understanding of learning and teaching in higher education. Interviews with the lecturers were conducted and the data was analysed using a categorical approach to narrative analysis. Building on positive psychology, particularly broaden-and-build theory, we consider lecturers' emotional responses as spirals, and thus had identified upward and downward emotional spirals regarding student feedback. Our findings suggest that pedagogical training may act as an intervention, as it appeared to be meaningful in providing guidance for coping with student feedback. We finally argue that lecturers need to find ways to cope with student feedback as this is essential for their teaching.

**Keywords** Lecturers · Student feedback · Emotional spirals · Coping · Narrative approach · Higher education

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## Introduction

Teaching is emotionally demanding, also in the higher education context. Research literature shows that university lecturers experience a great deal of stress at work, often linked to negative student interaction (Devonport et al. 2008; Winefield and Jarrett 2001). The latter may include student feedback. It has been noted that students have difficulty understanding and interpreting feedback (Higgins et al. 2001). Likewise, university lecturers often find themselves unable to deal with (Spiller and Harris 2013) or appropriately interpret student feedback (Richardson 2005). In particular, negative interpretations of student feedback can evoke negative emotions and add to lecturers' anxious feelings and stress. Roxå and Mårtensson (2011) described a couple of small-scale studies in the Swedish university context that indeed showed that lecturers experienced emotional tension and frustration when receiving negative feedback. On the other hand, research has shown that lecturers who receive positive student feedback are not necessarily the most effective teachers (Christopher and Shane 2007). Arguably, student feedback may be essential to how lecturers feel about their teaching and their students.

Although students' perspectives on feedback have been documented extensively (Feldman 2007; Scott 2014; Wachtel 1998), only a few studies have considered lecturers' responses to student feedback or the possible influence that student feedback has on lecturers' practices (Abedin et al. 2014; Arthur 2009; Moore and Kuol 2005). Moreover, as observed by Roxå and Mårtensson (2011), even fewer studies have addressed lecturers' emotional responses to student feedback. Despite the fact that these common issues are rarely discussed in the literature, the growing use of student feedback as a means of evaluating teachers' effectiveness (e.g., Nair et al. 2010; Zalka 2009) demonstrates that examining lecturers' responses to student feedback is timely and of considerable interest to the field. In this narrative study, we thus examine seven Finnish university lecturers' responses to student feedback and how they cope with it. Although we explore coping with student feedback from the lecturers' viewpoint and we do not provide the feedback they had received from their students, lecturers' narratives displayed some hints of what the actual feedback might had been. Additionally, our study adds to the body of knowledge as we build on the notions deriving from the theories of positive psychology and coping, which were previously rarely applied to explore the abovementioned problem.

We argue that interpreting student feedback in a relevant way (Arthur 2009) and coping with it is essential due to its potential influence on lecturers' practices and their professional development. Unfortunately, lecturers usually do not receive any guidance in this area (Richardson 2005)—they do not feel they know how to respond to or act on the feedback (Spiller and Harris 2013). In addition, many lecturers have had little or no formal teacher education to prepare them for teaching (Kane et al. 2002). To our knowledge, earlier studies exploring lecturers' responses to student feedback (e.g., Arthur 2009; Moore and Kuol 2005) did not address the role of pedagogical training in how lecturers understand and react to student feedback. Many universities in Finland arrange pedagogical training (professional development courses) for their lecturers. The participants in this study had undergone university pedagogy studies, which will allow us to explore the possible influence of this setting on lecturers' responses and how they coped with the feedback they received from their students. However, this study was not purposively designed to provide any form of intervention regarding coping with student feedback. In this paper, we thus address the following research questions: *How do lecturers respond to student feedback? How do their emotional responses*

*and coping strategies differ? What is the role of pedagogical training in lecturers' coping with student feedback?*

## Theoretical framework

### Student feedback

Scott (2014) acknowledges that the term “feedback” has often been left undefined; however, the use of student feedback in attempts to enhance the quality of teachers' work is widespread (Gaertner 2014; Kinash et al. 2015). Moreover, student feedback is gaining relevance for the evaluation of teaching (Nair et al. 2010) and is in some higher education contexts used for decision-making on promotion and tenure (Zakka 2009). This results in the situation where lecturers find themselves dissatisfied, stressed, and struggling to cope with the feedback. The feedback obtained from students usually addresses the teacher's performance or the goals and contents of the course; and it can be collected in many different ways, most commonly in written form through questionnaires, but also by means of open-ended replies or orally (Huxham et al. 2008; Richardson 2005). In addition, the linguistic delivery of the feedback has also been noted as being highly important because the wording can influence the interpretation of the feedback (Skipper and Douglas 2012). In this sense, Skipper and Douglas (2012) discuss that person-related feedback appears to be especially harmful opposed to process-related feedback.

Much has been written on whether student feedback can actually influence the quality of teaching. For example, Kember et al. (2002) question whether student feedback obtained through questionnaires could improve teaching and consequently learning, and name the ineffective use of the feedback as one of the reasons for bringing student feedback into question. Arthur (2009), on the other hand, indicates that student feedback could develop lecturers' professionalism. Likewise, Huxham et al. (2008) note, that feedback is crucial for lecturers' reflective practices. Here, we take an interpretive stand on feedback and argue that more than the actual student feedback, it is the lecturers' interpretation of the feedback which shapes their further actions. In our view, student feedback can assist lecturers in developing their teaching only if it is constructive, and if lecturers understand, interpret, and cope with it properly (see also Gaertner 2014). Although negative experiences and emotions can at times act as an incentive for improvement, strong negative emotions when receiving negative student feedback may hinder lecturers in investing effort in improving their teaching.

### Positive psychology and emotional spirals

Specific research relating to university lecturers' emotions and student feedback is scarce. About the research into emotions, Pekrun et al. (2014) note that “most studies have used a two-dimensional conception of affective states and employed summary measures of positive and negative affect that do not account for diverse emotional experience...” (p. 116). We build on these premises and chose to apply Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of emotions as it arguably allows for exploration of lecturers' subjective emotional responses to student feedback. We explore these emotional responses within the narratives lecturers tell about their experiences. In our view, the lecturers' narratives will provide insights into the broadening or narrowing of their attention, thinking or action in response to emotional experiences. Building

on Garland et al. (2010), we understand lecturers' emotions as self-organizing systems and as spirals. This means that each single emotion is its own system, and can under specific contextual influences activate other emotions. These emotions are then able to self-organize to form an emotion pattern or a higher-level emotion system (e.g., Izard et al. 2000). Izard et al. (2000) state that "the emotional pattern and the resulting emotion experiences are unique to the person and situation," (p. 19). Arguably, lecturers' narratives will display the uniqueness of lecturers' emotional responses to student feedback. However, because narratives are also social and shared, they will provide a lens into the similarities and differences between these responses.

Generally, negative emotions get a great deal of research attention due to their negative effect on one's life (Gable et al. 2004). The so called 'negativity-bias' (Rozin and Royzman 2001) or the belief that "bad is stronger than good" is well-documented (Baumeister et al. 2001). However, positive emotions, are also relevant to explore (Fredrickson 2001). They promote one's well-being and are therefore especially important in the context of teaching (Hargreaves 1998). According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions broaden lecturers' attention, thinking, and actions, while negative emotions narrow them (Fredrickson 2001; see also Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Therefore, we can talk about upward and downward emotional spirals. Upward spirals occur when positive emotions induce psychological broadening and thus expand a lecturer's mind-set and actions (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). The latter process leads to the "building" aspect of the mentioned theory, and thus increases one's openness to positive events (Fredrickson 2001). This means that one further engages in the activities which may reciprocate in positive emotions (Garland et al. 2010). In this line, for example, university lecturers' positive emotions have been linked to better teaching approaches (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne 2011; Trigwell 2012).

On the other hand, Garland et al. (2010) explain that repeated negative emotions, can trigger what we refer to as a downward spiral. Narrowed and pessimistic thinking leads to ongoing negative emotions as the subject continues to interpret new experiences in light of these emotions (Fredrickson 2001; Peterson and Seligman 1984). In the case of lecturers, this further shapes their negative beliefs of themselves as teachers and of others, such as their students. We argue that a downward spiral can be particularly damaging in the long run as it may lead to dissatisfaction and may hinder the lecturers' teaching or may even lead them to leave the profession. We note here that from the viewpoint of positive psychology (Garland et al. 2010), by preventing lecturers' negative emotions, we do not automatically cultivate their positive emotions (Fredrickson 2001). Instead, a more conscious or intentional action of cultivating positive emotions is needed, as it is understood that to minimize negativity, positive emotional experiences should outweigh negative ones (Baumeister et al. 2001).

### **Coping with student feedback**

Coping with student feedback as a lecturer is crucial and timely; however, little empirical evidence has been obtained on this topic. Commonly, lecturers give feedback to students with the aim of improving their learning experiences and outcomes. We know that feedback may serve as a facilitator of learning and development. Lecturers should therefore also be able to receive it, deal with it appropriately, and, most of all, learn from it. We build on the premise that appropriately coping with student feedback will influence lecturers' professional practice. Arguably, lecturers need to learn to use effective coping strategies for overcoming stress induced by student feedback.

Much has been written about coping in order to handle stressful life events (Frydenberg and Lewis 1993; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) differentiate between problem-based and emotion-based coping. Whereas problem-based coping involves action taken to solve a problem, emotion-based coping may also involve non-productive behaviour such as avoidance. Similarly, Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) talk about problem solving and remaining optimistic on one hand, and non-productive coping involving ignoring the problem, worrying, and wishful thinking on the other. Based on the existing literature, we did not identify any studies specifically addressing lecturers' coping with student feedback. Most relevant to this study though, Arthur (2009) developed a typology of lecturer responses, which we see somewhat akin to coping strategies. In this typology, four possible reactions range from shame, blame, tame (the students), and reframe (seeing the negative as something positive).

In this paper, we understand lecturers' coping through the framework of positive psychology. The "building" aspect of Fredrickson's (2001) theory is in our view related to coping. When positive emotions increase, the lecturers' ability to build resources also increases. We consider coping strategies as part of the resources lecturers need in their professional lives. In line with this theory, coping should not only be understood in terms of dealing with negative experiences and their related emotions, but we also need to look at coping from the perspective of positive experiences. We agree with Fredrickson et al. (2001) that finding positive meaning as a coping strategy is a powerful way of cultivating positive emotions during times of crisis. The authors propose to find positive meaning by (a) reframing negative events in a positive light, (b) giving positive value to ordinary events, and (c) attaining realistic goals (see also Folkman 1997). Similarly, Schwarzer and Knoll (2007) note that in positive coping, also labelled as proactive coping, people interpret difficult situations as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Arguably, considering that student feedback often induces emotional tension (Roxå and Mårtensson 2011), proactive coping with student feedback seems particularly useful for lecturers and for the quality of their work (cf. Devonport et al. 2008). We assume that if lecturers find some form of positive meaning in negative student feedback, such as using feedback in order to develop their own teaching, this would influence lecturers to feel more positive emotions towards student feedback (cf. Fredrickson et al. 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002).

### **Study context: an example of practices at one Finnish university**

Generally, almost all lecturers at Finnish universities collect feedback on their courses. It is important to note that although student feedback might be used as a way to evaluate lecturers and might even affect the development of their careers, this is not the case here. Student feedback in the Finnish university context has solely informative purposes, and it is in the lecturers' power alone to act on it. The participant lecturers in our study had collected student feedback during or after the courses they were teaching, and the feedback was either in written or oral form. The feedback received varied greatly between the lecturers; from being more or less positive or negative to more or less constructive. We thus note that the feedback the participants received may not be comparable, however, as our aim is to show what the feedback

meant to the participants and the ways they dealt with it, we want to document this issue from the subjective, interpretive stand of each lecturer's personal experience.

In addition to their initial education, the lecturers in this study had undergone university pedagogy studies (25 ECTS)<sup>1</sup> at the Faculty of Education, at the University of Oulu. These studies last 2 years and aim to reinforce lecturers' interest in student-centred teaching and to support the construction of their professional identity. The latter concept was understood as defined by Gee (2001), that lecturer identity comes from their professional status, lecturers' interactions with others, and their interpretations of their own experiences. The main goal of the pedagogy studies is that the participants find their personal teaching style and become aware of their views on learning, which would overall improve their knowledge and teaching skills. The university pedagogy studies consist of activity-based group meetings, peer group sessions, writing reflective portfolios, and mentored teaching practice linked to the lecturers' own work. The main contents are the lecturers' competency areas, reflection, practical theory, teachers' professional identity, shared expertise, and research-based teaching. Finally, the red line running through the pedagogical training is a therapeutic emphasis on goals and contents, as well as the methods used; the participants thus have multiple opportunities to share their experiences, to be heard and understood and to grow through their learning process.

The fourth author of this paper was a teacher of the university pedagogy studies. Arguably, her role is central in terms of how these studies were conducted. She has been educating university teachers for more than 20 years. Her teaching philosophy includes an emphasis on creating safe learning environments, enhancing the participants' learning by activating their reflection process and sharing of their experiences. She also underlines the significance of collaborative processes in the participants' learning. The teacher underwent professional training as a guidance counsellor, and in her teaching, she applied the skills she learnt while obtaining that qualification.

## Methods

### Research subjects and data collection

Forty lecturers participated in studies of university pedagogy from 2010 to 2012 at the University of Oulu, in Finland, taught by the third and fourth authors of this paper. Lecturers were asked to keep two portfolios during their university pedagogy studies. Among other things, the lecturers described in their portfolios how their experience of teaching had changed their views and practices. The fourth author of this paper read all the portfolios carefully and purposively chose seven lecturers for further examination via interview. She chose individuals whose portfolios displayed a wide range of variation in views and teaching experiences, and whose narratives were particularly information-rich (Patton 1990). As the teacher of the university pedagogy studies, she had an in-depth view of the background, experiences and progress of all the participants in the study. In addition, it was decided to present cases that would display the positive-negative continuum regarding emotional responses to student feedback, therefore four participants were chosen with more or less positive responses and three with more or less negative responses.

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<sup>1</sup> 60 ECTS credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year, and each ECTS credit stands for around 26–27 working hours.

All seven participants (two male and five female) were willing to participate in the study, thus the third author conducted in-depth interviews with them in November and December of 2012. The interviews lasted 70–90 min each. They were asked about their past and present experiences using open-ended prompts. Initially, when the study began, the aim was to investigate lecturers' identity development, therefore the questions asked included items such as: “*Describe a meaningful experience for your development as a teacher?*” In addition, we asked: “*What does student feedback mean for your teaching?*” The latter question became the focus of this study, as the lecturers' narratives seemed particularly relevant on this point. The sub-questions related to student feedback varied, depending on the participants' responses. We refer to the subjects in our study with the following pseudonyms: Minna, Raija, Sanna, Matti, Kari, Anne, and Venla. The lecturers were from four faculties: natural sciences, humanistic sciences, medicine, and economics. The subjects differ in the amount of teaching experience: two have been teaching less than 5 years, four more than 5 years and one of the lecturers for more than 20 years.

### Data analysis

Narrative inquiry, in particular, the categorical approach, was applied to analyse the data (Lieblich et al. 1998; Kaasila 2007a). All the data gathered from the portfolios and interviews were considered as lecturers' narratives. The entire data set was then read and the sections where lecturers talked about their responses to student feedback were dissected. We also searched through the data set for information on the impact of university pedagogy studies on the lecturers' responses to the student feedback. In addition, any possible coping strategies the lecturers might have applied in order to manage the feedback were particularly examined. The chosen sections of data were then analysed in detail in the following way. The first two authors read the selected data and examined the similarities and differences between the lecturers' emotional responses. We then formed our interpretations independently. We applied data-driven analysis, and formed interpretations based on our own views, experiences, and prior knowledge regarding this topic. At this point, we did not use any of the previous studies as the basis for analysis. Afterwards, the interpretations were discussed and the agreement between the two researchers was high.

In the late phase of the data analysis, once the findings were more or less clear, we searched for an appropriate framework to interpret the data in the light of the earlier literature and thus support our own claims. In our view, the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson et al. 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002) provides a potent and versatile perspective on emotions, and in particular on positive ones. After taking into account the findings of these and other studies, the first two authors re-evaluated their interpretation. In terms of the content, the initial interpretations did not change much; however, earlier studies did provide a relevant vocabulary. In the final phase of the data analysis, the second two authors read the interpretations and gave their input. Agreement with the interpretations and the choice of the framework was high. Finally, for the purposes of this paper, the data was reduced in order to obtain the excerpts that convey the participants' most central views.

### Results

In this section, firstly each of the seven cases are presented separately. By doing this, the aim is to document the uniqueness of each of the participants' emotional responses to student

feedback. Secondly, the cases in terms of their coping with student feedback and the upward and downward emotional spirals are compared.

### Lecturers' responses to student feedback

“Based on the student feedback, I know when a course has been quite successful. And when I get the feedback that I could change something, I usually take it into account. But when I read the feedback, I mostly keep in my mind the things that worked well. Sometimes [...] I wonder whether it is at all reasonable to change the course if 49 students think that it is good and one sees it as bad. [...] I am self-assured and positive because working with students is enormously great for me. When I activate them to think and do things, nobody can stop them. [...] I have constructive and critical discussions with my students, and I teach them how to give feedback. After every lesson, I ask them, what they learned. Their replies are usually excellent...” (Matti)

Matti's discussion shows he received mostly positive feedback from his students. We see that his positive emotions triggered broadening in his thinking and actions: even when the feedback has been negative, he chooses to focus on the positive and reflect firstly on what went well. He also has a clear view about changes related to his teaching that are worthwhile. Matti's narrative shows how his positive mind-set and emotions help him build resources to evoke further positive experiences: he regularly asks students for their feedback and also guides them in giving constructive feedback. By asking them to reflect on their own learning, he encourages students to take responsibility for it. It is likely that with such an approach, he may minimize any non-constructive feedback.

“Student feedback is often quite general; students express what was good and what could be done differently. For me the way students behave during the lecture and how actively they are participating is more central. Non-verbal feedback is important. But if someone says my course was very nice and good, it surely feels good. [...] In university pedagogy studies, I gained some ideas about what I could do differently. And when I was successful in applying new teaching methods, this of course encouraged me to try new and different things also later. [...] To be easily approachable has been important for me. The fact that I am still quite young helps. I see that my students dare to ask so called ‘stupid’ questions. I also accept that I don't need to know everything and that my role is not to transfer all my knowledge to my students.” (Kari)

Kari prefers to rely on non-verbal feedback to gauge the success of his teaching. Due to his participation in the university pedagogy studies, he also applied some changes and novelties to his teaching, for which he seems to have received positive feedback and has experienced success, which further encouraged him to try new approaches. Similarly to Matti, Kari highlighted his good relationship with his students. We notice that how Kari sees his role as a teacher is also central to his interpretations of student feedback. He allows himself to not know everything, which also makes him more open and willing to accept criticism.

“When developing my teaching according to student feedback, I got much less critical feedback. Student feedback is certainly meaningful for my teaching. During the university pedagogy studies I got the desire to develop my courses.... And the positive feedback that I got from my students together with the fact that I had tried something



new has inspired me to try out even more novelties. [...] As a teacher, I aim to activate students to think and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. [...] I have had many feelings of success related to my teaching. I have a very positive attitude toward teaching and students. I am easily approachable. I like my role of a consultant, replying to students' questions.... I have a closer relationship with students, more equal. Sometimes I say that 'I don't know the solution for this but we can look it up together'. Students are also allowed to disagree with me." (Anne)

Anne uses student feedback to develop her teaching. The positive feedback she receives, in turn, evokes expanding resources to develop her teaching even further. Like Matti and Kari, she has a positive view of teaching and of her students. She considers herself easily approachable and is not concerned about her authority; she accepts that she might not have answers to everything, and she also says she treats her students as her equal.

"For me it has been very important that I got feedback about my teaching. Through it I have found my strengths and the domains that I still have to develop.... During the studies, I got the courage to change my way of teaching.... I learnt to interpret from students' faces how they see my teaching. So now I am able to change my teaching even during my lesson. [...] My aim is to learn through student feedback, if it includes such things that really are worth developing.... Therefore, I regularly collect student feedback.... During the studies I also learnt that I don't react to individual feedback, but if many students propose the same target for development, then I begin to ponder." (Venla)

Similarly to the others, Venla sees student feedback as central to her teaching and uses self-development rhetoric (Kaasila 2007b). Just as Kari, Venla relies on non-verbal feedback and adjusts her teaching accordingly. Venla emphasizes that she learned to reflect on those aspects of her teaching during her university pedagogy studies that the majority of students believe could be improved, rather than changing her teaching due to an isolated piece of feedback. Overall, Venla's narrative shows how positive interpretation of student feedback broadened her thought-action repertoire and helped her further develop her teaching.

"I have often received positive feedback, but I've felt very bad, even when I got a single negative piece of feedback. I would grasp onto that negative one and would forget all the positive things that the students wrote.... Sometimes, I cried while reading them. There was one, very evil, disgusting feedback that hurt me in a personal way. That student was not able to give feedback; he/she only wanted to hurt me. I got to the state where I thought that I didn't want to teach them anymore. [...] My views about teaching have changed now. More importantly, my attitude towards students and their learning has started to change. [...] Through the university pedagogy studies, I have learnt to distance myself from student feedback. I also have to be prepared for receiving hurtful feedback. I have to see the whole picture – if only the minority of my students give negative feedback, this does not mean that I am a poor teacher. It took some time before I was able to see this in a more reasonable way." (Raija)

In contrast to the previous cases, the episode that Raija described was very traumatic. It appeared that one very negative piece of person-related feedback (see Skipper and Douglas 2012), took away all the joy and meaning from her teaching. She also used extreme, emotion-laden utterances such as "very evil" and "disgusting". At the same time, it appeared that personal and critical feedback narrowed Raija's perspective as she

did not take positive feedback into account. She wanted to give up teaching. Like in Arthur's (2009) study, Raija coped by explicitly blaming a student and his/her intentions to hurt her. However, it seems that Raija's views about teaching and here attitudes towards the students changed during the university pedagogy courses. Raija's views broadened and she relates to student feedback in a more analytical way. She also built better resources for coping with critical student feedback: she is now able to distance herself from it.

"Student feedback influences me 100 %. I take all feedback into account, and I suffer enormously.... For me, it is a very personal thing.... Of course, I understand well that its aim is also to evaluate the course... [...] In the past year, I noticed that the biggest change has happened in the goals that I set. Now, I understand better how important it has been to become aware of what it means to become a teacher. I received a lot of positive feedback from my students about the encouraging manner in which I supervise them, instead of lecturing. On the basis of the feedback, I am developing my teaching so that there is enough time for group discussions and that I use less time for my monologues.... When I am collecting student feedback, I also try to guide my students to think about the whole picture and what has been their role in their learning." (Minna)

It is obvious that Minna also took student feedback personally. In describing her strong emotions, Minna used an extreme utterance such as, "I suffer enormously." It also appeared that participating in university pedagogy studies promoted goal setting, and afterwards many things started changing—Minna's views of herself as a teacher improved significantly. She now uses positive student feedback as a resource for further developing her teaching. She also encourages her students to think about their own responsibility in the learning process. Overall, it seems that Minna's confidence in relation to handling student feedback improved.

"For me, it was challenging that some students constantly questioned me and my teaching by saying, 'What do you know about this?' Some students were just not motivated to learn. They were immature. [...] My pedagogical expertise has improved a lot during the university pedagogy studies. My thinking has changed – now I am a supervisor and supporter of student learning. This education has given me tools. I don't panic when a student says something critical. I no longer respond immediately by feeling attacked. Instead, I try to relax and think. And when I feel calmer, I read the feedback again, and I pick up the most essential things. [...] Based on the feedback from my colleagues, I have been positively surprised because they see me as a naturally likeable and calm teacher who also inspires with confidence." (Sanna)

Like Raija, Sanna blamed students and their lack of motivation and maturity for negative feedback she had received. During the university pedagogy studies, Sanna's perspective broadened: her views of herself as a teacher seemed to have changed. The positive feedback that she received from her colleagues played an important role in this. Like Minna and Raija, she also appeared to have more confidence in handling student feedback—she now seems better able to distance herself from negative feedback. She is also better prepared to take criticism into account. Positive views towards students and seeing herself as easily approachable are important resources for Sanna.

## Comparing lecturers' responses and coping strategies in relation to student feedback

Based on the emotional responses to student feedback and coping with student feedback before the lecturers started their university pedagogy studies, they were grouped into two categories: Matti, Kari, Anne, and Venla who experienced an upward emotional spiral, and Raija, Minna, and Sanna who experienced a downward emotional spiral. However, we acknowledge the variation in experiences within each group of cases.

The lecturers who experienced an upward emotional spiral saw student feedback in a non-threatening way, as an opportunity for personal and professional development and were motivated to face challenges (Schwarzer and Knoll 2007). They applied proactive coping strategies that were problem- and emotion-based (Devonport et al. 2008; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). They were able to look at the feedback more rationally, detect the problem, and engage in solving it. In practice, this means that the lecturers tried to solve the problems that the overall feedback identified (see also Frydenberg and Lewis 1993). This enabled them to experience the feedback positively, and it further motivated them to develop their teaching. Overall, positive teaching experiences and positive student feedback enhanced the lecturers' views of themselves as teachers. In addition, these lecturers displayed more self-development tendencies (for *self-development rhetoric*, see Kaasila 2007b), which were less apparent in the downward spiral cases. They had clear goals and they committed themselves to their high personal standards. In addition, they wanted to build positive relationships with their students and encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning. Arguably, strong self-development tendencies may be central when it comes to lecturers' upward emotional spirals. Similarly, Cross (2002) notes that lecturers feel less anxious about student feedback if they believe that feedback helps them evaluate and improve their own practices.

The lecturers who experienced a downward emotional spiral saw negative student feedback as threatening. It was noticeable that negative emotions narrowed their attention and triggered a negative response (Fredrickson 2001) such as the intention to give up and quit teaching (see Raija's case). Negative emotions also led to the formation of negative beliefs about themselves and the students too (cf. Garland et al. 2010). Before they attended the pedagogical training, these lecturers coped with the feedback in a non-productive way (Frydenberg and Lewis 1993), commonly by blaming the students for their inadequacy in giving feedback (cf. Arthur 2009). However, the downward emotional spirals differed between the lecturers. For example, Raija's case presented the most negative picture, including negative beliefs, defensiveness, worrying and wishful thinking (see also Geddes and Baron 1997; Frydenberg and Lewis 1993), while these issues were only partly evident in Minna's and Sanna's case. Our findings also have some similarities with the results of Arthur (2009); for instance, downward spiralling included lecturers wishing that students would give negative feedback in a more constructive way. In such situations, reframing negative criticism played a central role in breaking down the downward spiral. In this process, lecturers accepted the negative feedback as a learning opportunity (Arthur 2009).

## Discussion

In this study, we examined seven university lecturers' responses to student feedback. Although Biron et al.'s (2008) study, in which 1000 university staff members were surveyed, found no

evidence that relationships with their students were a source of stress, our study, however, showed that student feedback was central to lecturers' views of themselves as teachers and was indeed a source of stress (see also Roxå and Mårtensson 2011). In line with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002; Garland et al. 2010), we identified two patterns of responses to receiving feedback from students: four lecturers displayed upward and three of them downward emotional spirals. It is therefore crucial that we understand the role emotions play and their potential as the foundation of our cognitive activities such as teaching (Hargreaves 1998) and take them seriously also in a higher education context. With this study, we aimed at providing qualitative evidence into the ways lecturers' may cope with student feedback and opened a discussion about this important, yet under-researched, topic. In what follows, therefore, we discuss some implications.

First, our cases demonstrated that although the actual feedback is important, it is the interpretation of the feedback and the mind-set of a particular lecturer concerning it that seem to matter the most. For example, all the lecturers in this study received negative feedback, however, it did not influence all of them in the same way. Some lecturers were thrown into a downward emotional spiral based on a single piece of negative feedback. They had a tendency to deal with student feedback in a non-productive way (Frydenberg and Lewis 1993; Lazarus and Folkman 1984), meaning that they fixated on one piece of negative feedback and lent it a disproportionate relevance. Conversely, upward emotional spiralling does not mean that the feedback has been only positive. It means that lecturers' coping strategy was more proactive, involving an understanding of the situation as being a positive challenge and seeing it as a part of a problem to be solved (Schwarzer and Knoll 2007). They did not see negative student feedback as being harmful, but instead as motivating. We see that confidence in one's own teaching skills as a part of a broad and positive mind-set, plays an important role here, as it prevents one from being easily undermined by negative feedback. This finding tells us, that the meaning of student feedback needs to be approached from each lecturer's subjective viewpoint.

Second, we too often expect that lecturers should have the ability to deal with student feedback as a natural part of their work. However, many struggle to cope with it. We thus learned from the lecturers who displayed upward emotional spiralling that some may be naturally more inclined towards a broad and positive thought-action pattern than others (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). However, lecturers who fell into downward emotional spirals informed us that those who do not share the former trait need guidance for coping with negative student feedback. It appeared that university pedagogy training promoted more positive upward emotional spiralling: although we cannot know whether the lecturers changed their previously displayed negative responses entirely, the data shows that they did start breaking down the downward spiral. We assume that the university pedagogy studies helped the lecturers deal with student feedback. This is an important finding as it gave us knowledge on the possible ways a setting akin to the university pedagogy training in this situation may be used as an intervention to help teach lecturers to cope with negative student feedback. This is in line with studies by Moore and Kuol (2005) and Arthur (2009), who noted that it is necessary to find appropriate tools for dealing with critical feedback. Up until now, however, little systematic research has been conducted into this subject.

However, it is important to note that the university pedagogy studies here were not specifically designed to promote lecturers' coping with student feedback; their coping occurred as a rather incidental outcome. This study was thus not purposively designed as an intervention study, but it could be said that it includes elements of intervention. On the basis of our insider

view into the design of this pedagogical training, we assume that its characteristics—such as a focus on overall development and one's awareness of his or her identity as a teacher, collegial discussions and peer support, and a non-threatening learning environment—made it possible for the lecturers to reframe how they responded to negative student feedback. The pedagogical training included distancing from feedback and reflecting on it in a more rational way (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). By encouraging the lecturers to enhance their teaching methods (Frydenberg and Lewis 1993), it may have helped them to apply problem-based coping strategies (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Agreeing with Flinders (1988), we see that lecturers are often isolated from their colleagues, which means they rarely get any feedback on their work. From this perspective, peer support and opportunities for giving and receiving collegial feedback, may have been central for emotion-based coping strategies (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). We thus argue for the need to create a safe and accepting setting within the higher education context that would allow lecturers to honestly and without shame share and explore their responses to student feedback. On the other hand, this setting should also provide them with opportunities to share their successes without being seen as being overly self-impressed. For example, we know that these lecturers undergoing their pedagogical training were often encouraged to recall positive emotions they experienced while receiving student feedback.

Third, some lecturers in our study explicitly mentioned teaching their students to give appropriate feedback. This is knowledge they acquired during the pedagogical training and arguably, such an activity facilitates receiving constructive, informative, process-related feedback that can help lecturers develop their teaching (see also Deci et al. 1999), and avoids the sort of person-related feedback that seemed to be the most hurtful (Skipper and Douglas 2012). In our understanding, teaching students to give feedback also signals that lecturers' care about their opinion and are incorporating it into their teaching.

This is only an exploratory study, therefore, we are aware of its limitations, and we acknowledge the contextuality of our findings. We do not attempt to generalise them as we know that different university environments might place more or less relevance on student feedback. We are also aware that not all lecturers have the opportunity to participate in such pedagogical training as the subjects in this study did. Regarding our results in terms of gender, the fact that only female participants displayed the downward emotional spiralling is, arguably, a coincidence. Although earlier research might provide some grounding to interpret this result in terms of the differing ways men and women deal with emotions, gender differences were not a focus of this paper. However, with upward and downward spirals, we showed how emotional responses, whether positive, negative, or both at the same time, can easily lead to spirals that can be more or less beneficial for the lecturers and that coping with student feedback is a necessary skill for practising lecturers and should not be neglected.

Finally, we argue for cultivating positive emotions in the higher education context. Intentional exploration of negative and positive responses that student feedback evokes, arguably, may bring positive change for lecturers and their students. For example, Borg (2001) noted that journal writing can provide an effective way of coping with negative emotions connected to receiving feedback (see also Kaasila and Lutovac 2011, 2015). On the other hand, by applying the thoughts of Fredrickson et al. (2001), we see that finding positive meanings in student feedback, and other teaching-related activities may be the most powerful way the lecturers could cultivate positive emotions and distance themselves from negative ones. In this sense, journaling positive emotions could be understood as a proactive coping strategy and as cultivating such emotions. Broadening of their thinking as a response to cultivating positive emotions will provide lecturers with resources for coping with student feedback and with the

motivation to develop their teaching. This will ultimately promote lecturers' professional growth.

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