Considerations of Feedback on Academic Writing in Post-Secondary Settings

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Introductory Note

This presentation followed a round table format with multiple purposes: to generate discussion about feedback among the faculty and students in attendance at the symposium and to consider some of the assumptions about feedback that arise from these discussions. As such, I first provided a context for a discussion about feedback in post-secondary education by presenting a brief review of some of the literature about feedback on second language academic writing. Participants in the round table then had the opportunity to discuss feedback from their perspectives as teachers, students, and faculty members. Before the presentation I applied for and obtained permission through ENREB to digitally record the discussions, with the consent of participants, as part of a study entitled “An investigation of student and faculty perspectives on feedback in academic writing in a post-secondary setting”. Therefore it is also possible to include in this paper some of the themes of the roundtable discussions. This paper, then, has two parts. The first is the formal presentation and the second is a summary of some of the discussions.

Part 1: Contextualizing the round table topic

In post-secondary settings, writing is a staple of academic work and a dominant way of evaluating student knowledge in a field (Canagarajah, 2011; Seror, 2008). Written comments on academic writing, commonly referred to as ‘feedback’, then, can be a “potentially a powerful influence on learning and achievement in higher education” (Hyland, 2013, p. 180). Methods and systems of giving feedback on academic writing, not to mention purposes for feedback, remain contested topics in research about academic writing in post-secondary settings (for example,
For second language learners in post-secondary settings, academic writing is a particularly high-stakes activity. These students work not only within new linguistic structures but also within academic discourse which, as Duff (2010) suggests, involves “enculturation, social practice, positioning, representation, and stance-taking” (p. 170) through the negotiation of “institutional and disciplinary ideologies” (p. 170). Written feedback is part of this academic discourse, yet in English as an Additional Language (EAL) courses, like English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, we don’t often teach students about feedback as an academic structure in the same way that we teach other academic skills (such as argumentation, research, academic writing). Furthermore, the language of this feedback is often different from the language that we formally teach in ESL classes\(^1\). This disconnect can cause students to be confused about what the feedback means or how to interpret the feedback. For example, in a small study that I conducted in which my objective was to investigate how written feedback is understood and interpreted by undergraduate EAL students, I asked three EAL students about their impressions of the feedback they received on academic writing in their (non-EAL) university courses\(^2\). One of the themes that

\(^1\) I realize that this may not be true for all instructors. Individual instructors may teach their students how to interpret the course-specific feedback, and some writing books do have feedback symbols and shorthand. However, the language of feedback is not generally a regular topic included in ESL/ESP courses.

\(^2\) For the study, I conducted hour-long interviews with 3 students who identified themselves as EAL learners. In the interviews, I asked questions about the current and past educational pursuits of the participants, the types of feedback they have received on their writing in their current undergraduate context, the types of feedback they find most/least useful, what they do when they receive feedback and how the feedback they have received in their current North American undergraduate context compares to the feedback they have received in other educational contexts (for example in their native country and language). I asked participants, if they felt it would help them to explain their perceptions of feedback, to bring copies of current writing assignments as examples of the kinds of feedback they receive. The undergraduate students who participated in the study were from three different linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Each of the participants had varied experiences with writing in their first language and in English. Additionally, each of the participants also had different experiences with the feedback they had received on writing in their first language.
emerged from the interviews was the participants’ perceptions of the feedback as somewhat coded. Two of the participants point to the phrases “be more specific”, “reword”, “word choice”, and “go deeper” as well as notations like “o.k.”, circles and “x”es as points of confusion for them in the feedback. They viewed these phrases and special notations as almost code-like structures that require some specialized or 'insider' knowledge in order to interpret them. Hyland (2013) has pointed out that “not all the messages conveyed [in feedback] are explicit or… related to the work at hand” but that they “inform students of their tutors’ beliefs about their subject, about learning, and about the value of literacy in their disciplines” (p. 180). I think that these “hidden messages” (Hyland, 2013) represent assumptions about academic writing, feedback on academic writing, and knowledge frameworks that often go unquestioned but that represent a form of cognitive injustice. It is these unquestioned assumptions that has become the focus of my research. The objectives of my dissertation project are to investigate assumptions about academic writing in English that are present in feedback on the writing of first year ESL students in a Canadian university and how the academic construct of feedback on written assignments is accessible (or inaccessible) to students whose first language is not English.

Research about feedback on academic writing in applied linguistics is a context for these research objectives. Historically, this research has taken a sort of causal approach to feedback by attempting to determine the most appropriate types of feedback to ensure language accuracy in writing (for example, Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2004; Farid & Samad, 2012). Some recent research about second language writing however, questions accuracy as a condition of academic writing (Canagarajah, 2006; Evans et al., 2010; Horner et al, 2011; Zawicki & Habib, 2014). These writers suggest that what have been considered errors in second language writing are not necessarily barriers to good
writing, but a way of negotiating language (Horner et al., 2011) in a globalized, post-colonial world in which the number of people for whom English is not their first language is “substantially larger” than the number of people who claim English as their first language (House, 2003, p.557). These writers point out that the multilingual makeup of classes in post-secondary settings in North America requires a new way of thinking about teaching writing. This observation raises questions about what it means for those giving the feedback (such as instructors, professors or teachers) to understand accuracy as a fixed standard and how the underlying, and often unexplored, assumptions about feedback are related to “issues of power and access” (Seror, 2008, p. 161) in second language academic writing and academic writing in general.

These ‘unexplored’ assumptions about feedback and their connections to power and access, then, are my particular interest: What assumptions do we make about feedback that confirm a ‘power over’ relationship, for example? What are the structures, language, modes of feedback that we use that imply a tacit knowledge about what is expected? What expectations do we have of our students to understand the feedback that we give them?

A subtext to questions of accuracy, language, and power is the knowledge practices involved in feedback on academic writing, including what types of knowledge are assumed, what types of knowledge are privileged, and how students can negotiate feedback in the high-stakes, power laden, processes of academic writing. Therefore, I think it is necessary to consider feedback within a cognitive justice framework. Theories of cognitive justice question “conceptions of knowledge...what it means to know...what counts as knowledge and how that knowledge is produced” (Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007, p. xxi). Cognitive justice frameworks investigate the “culturally embedded character of knowledge and…of producing knowledge”
(Coleman and Dionisio, 2009, p. 397) and attempt to understand the “epistemological dominance” (Andreotti, Ahenekew & Cooper, 2011, p. 40) which is the result of the suppression, through colonialism, of other “forms of knowledges and…the subaltern social groups whose social groups were informed by such knowledges” (Santos, Nunes and Meneses, 2007, p. xix).

There are a number of different ways in which theorists term considerations of knowledge and justice, including cognitive justice (Guilherme, 2014; Santos, 2007a,b, 2011; Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007; Visvanathan, 2009), epistemic justice (Code, 2014; Fricker, 2008), epistemic responsibility (Code, 1987), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2008) and epistemic ignorance (Kuokkanen, 2008). I have chosen to use the term ‘cognitive justice’ here because of its position in the, now relatively frequently quoted, assertion that “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (Santos, Nunes & Menenses, 2007, p. ix). The cognitive justice frameworks pioneered by Santos, Nunes, Meneses, Visvanathan and others suggest a transnationalism that is appropriate for considering knowledge frameworks in second language learning. In addition, these same theorists assert that “the need for cognitive justice” (Andreotti, 2011, p. 381) is central to the “quest for epistemological exchange, balance and equity” that is “currently at the centre of academic discussion and research” (Guilherme, 2014, p. 69). This assertion also seems appropriate in a discussion that involves pedagogical practices in academic writing. At the same time, I acknowledge the implicit limitations in choosing one phrase to describe a multi-layered concept.

These considerations about feedback, knowledge and justice are therefore linked to educational justice and raise questions about what types of knowledge are privileged and how that privilege is represented (Andreotti, Ahenakew & Cooper, 2011; Fricker, 2008; Santos, 2011; Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007) in various educational contexts. It is possible that
understanding the connections between the language of feedback, how it is perceived by students, and what assumptions about knowledge are inherent in that feedback can be important for programs, such as English for Academic Purposes programs, Academic writing courses, or University 1 courses that prepare students for “institutional and faculty expectations” (Benesch, 2001, p. 23) in post-secondary settings. This understanding may be able to help these programs better prepare students for success in writing in high-stakes settings. On a larger scale, these understandings may contribute to considering feedback as an issue of cognitive justice in post-secondary contexts, with insights that can possibly extend to other student populations. For example, examining the assumptions that underpin feedback on academic writing has relevance for other knowledges, such as indigenous knowledges, that are represented by the varied student populations in Canadian universities.

Part 2: Discussion themes and highlights

For the round table discussion, I asked participants to consider the following questions about feedback from their perspectives as teachers, students, and faculty members:

- Briefly discuss academic writing in your area of study/teaching: what are some of the characteristics of academic writing that are discipline-specific? What are some types of writing assignments for which you would provide/receive written feedback?

- What are some of the things that you take into consideration when you give feedback on written assignments or when you read feedback that has been given to you on a written assignment? What aspects of the writing are the focus for the feedback?

- What do you expect your students to ‘do’ with the feedback on their academic writing? Or, if you are a student, what do you ‘do’ with the feedback you receive? What do you think your instructors expect you to ‘do’ with it?

- In the discipline/area that you work in within education, have you observed any particular practices/conventions/assumptions around feedback on written assignments?
In the relatively short time (about 10 – 15 minutes) available for discussion, it was not possible for the three groups to delve into all of these questions. However, it is possible to trace three themes through the discussions that did take place: considerations involved in providing feedback, connections between feedback and assessment, and student perspectives on feedback. Within each of these themes, there are multiple threads that reflect the participants’ roles as instructors\(^3\), students, or both.

**Considerations involved in providing feedback.** From their points of view as instructors, discussion participants commented on the various considerations that they make when providing feedback to their students. A thread in this theme was considerations of the purposes for feedback. Common to these considerations was that a purpose of feedback is to contribute to learning. As one participant noted: “evaluation is not to penalize people, it is to see if they have learned something or not”. Another participant said that she expects her students to “use the feedback to improve in their next assignment.” Remarking on the reality of their situations, though, some of these same participants also indicated that they often have no way of knowing if it fulfills this purpose. One participant noted, for example that students “go on to a different set of instructors…there is no way to track if they have used the feedback I have provided”.

Ways of providing feedback was also a topic of discussion within this theme. A main method of providing feedback discussed by participants was written feedback, with or without a rubric (to be discussed more in a later section). However, face-to-face meetings (including having students read the writing aloud) were also mentioned by some participants as a preferred method of providing feedback. One participant noted that his reason for giving one-to-one

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\(^3\) I am using ‘instructor’ here to mean the person in an instructional role. In the discussions at hand, that might mean a teacher in a K-12 setting, an instructor at a college, or a faculty member at a university.
feedback was because he “treat[s] every single person differently” and doesn’t “have a standard set of expectations for every single person”.

For one participant, the method of providing feedback is connected to the amount of time it takes to provide feedback. She said: “I have to consider how many students I have in my class and how much time I can actually realistically spend on giving feedback.”

**Student perspectives on feedback.** A number of the discussion participants, in their roles as students, indicated that they are often uncertain about the feedback they receive. They identified two main reasons for this uncertainty: a lack of rubrics to indicate how writing can be improved and how it is assessed, and uncertainty about what some of the feedback actually means. Many of the participants, in their roles as students, agreed that rubrics are necessary at the university level. As one participants put it, rubrics should be used “so they [students] know what they are being marked on, what they are being judged on.”

A number of participants commented about not understanding the comments they receive from their instructors. Various participants specified the source of this incomprehensibility. One noted that it is tied to the grade: “I’m not understanding where the mark on the paper is coming from based on the comments.” Another noted that it is based on the notations used for the comments: “I find that comments that do have these kind of abstract markings, they are using a system of editing that is maybe more suited towards like journalism, for example, and maybe they are not giving the legend that they are using and they assume that oh all students will know what…the c with two lines or whatever what these markings mean.” Other students specified that their confusion comes from the language of the feedback: “sometimes when professors say you should go deeper I don’t know how deeper should be”.
Some of the international student discussion participants also raised questions about the roles that cultural and language differences play in their understandings of the feedback they receive.

**Connections between feedback and assessment.** The theme that perhaps garnered most discussion among participants, from both instructor and student perspectives, was the ways in which feedback and assessment are connected. The use and development of rubrics was the topic that dominated this theme. From student perspectives, rubrics were almost undisputedly considered a necessity. Some participants said: “I am definitely pro rubric” and “I would never dream of giving an assignment to students without giving them a rubric that laid out all of the expectations ahead of time and then marking it right on that rubric”. As noted in the previous section, these students also discussed the impact that the lack of rubrics has on the assessment of their written work.

However, from instructor perspectives, rubrics were not an undisputed necessity in feedback or assessment. One participant, for example, noted that she gives “copious feedback” but that she doesn’t “believe in rubrics.” She explains it this way: “My course outlines are very specific; they give the parts that are required and how much weighting they have. So it is not really a rubric but it is telling people exactly what to include and what it is going to be marked out of and it is philosophical.” Instructors also discussed whether they use rubrics, why they use rubrics or not, how they develop rubrics and whether or not they hand out the rubric ahead of time.

**Summary**

It is not possible to draw conclusions or make generalizations about feedback in post-secondary settings from these discussions. However, the discussion themes highlight student and
instructor ideas about feedback, specifically purposes for feedback and types of feedback. The discussions about assessment and feedback demonstrate that the two are clearly connected in the minds of both the students and instructors who took part in the discussion.

Finally, the discussion themes also raise student and instructor concerns around some of the constraints placed on feedback because of program or institutional situations. The acknowledgement by a participant that although her purpose for giving feedback is to help students with future writing, she has no way of knowing if it does because her students move on to other courses is one example of this. It points to the possibility within programs, departments or faculties that discussions around responding to student writing might be helpful for students’ development as writers. In addition, the point raised by one participant (and acknowledged by the other group members as consistent with their experiences) about the time it takes to give feedback on writing raises a further institutional constraint around feedback. That participant said that when she worked with a small group of students she was “able to give them a lot of feedback”, allow them to revise their writing and then “look at it again and again”, which is “where their writing really improved”. However, with a group of 35 or more students, “it is just not feasible”.

This acknowledgement is consistent with Seror’s (2009) study in which both students and instructors noted the importance of feedback but the instructors also viewed feedback as an “onerous and undervalued task in a university setting where ideal feedback practices were, in fact, incompatible with institutional pressures to limit resource expenditures, maximize research productivity, and adhere to strict grade distributions” (Seror, 2009, p. 223). Therefore, it is necessary to further consider the interconnectedness of feedback and institutional parameters such as class sizes, instructor teaching loads and student attainment. The discussions in this
round table suggest that investigation of feedback within the context of the institution is an area for further study.
References


