

So what do students do with feedback, anyway? A project to develop a tool for faculty to understand students' uses of written feedback

Nature and goals of the project

How do students use the feedback they receive on their written work? What are the barriers hampering students' successful assimilation of feedback into their learning processes? What about the way feedback is understood keeps students from writing well? Is the use of feedback a "threshold concept" (Meyer and Land 2003) in academic writing? Through this project I want to better understand what students do with the written feedback that they receive in order to develop strategies for understanding how students are using feedback in their classes.

Although scholarship has been written detailing techniques for providing feedback, little has been done that investigates how students use feedback. Nancy Sommers (1982) is well known to compositionists for her study of writing teachers' comments; her article argued for increasing the clarity and specificity of teacher comments on student papers. Subsequent work by other writers also addresses ways to make comments more effective, offering advice for incorporating technology and improving peer feedback. Sommers (2006) distinguishes herself again when she critiques her earlier research. She bases her new conclusions on her Harvard study of 400 undergraduates' writing, arguing that learning happens when "students and teachers create a partnership through feedback- a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction" (250). While her study increases knowledge of how some students reacted to the written feedback they received, much of her analysis was on final papers and projects, and thus her conclusions are based on assumptions that students will apply comments from one semester to work in another, or "across the drafts." While this study moves closer to understanding how students react to feedback, it still doesn't explain what students do with it when it is part of ongoing work in a semester-long course. Nor does this research offer conclusions that imagine ways of using feedback other than extending instruction to receptive students.

Interesting studies have appeared in the field of second language teaching. Fiona Hyland (2003) collected data using a mixture of interviews, text analysis, and think-aloud sessions, arriving at conclusions regarding the type of feedback teachers most commonly gave and the frequency with which students used it. Yi-Chia Lin's study (2009) of a particular group of EFL student writers (who claimed that only teacher

feedback was useful in improving their writing) suggests that the privilege given to teacher comments over peer comments may be more complex than a question of authority, and thus worthy of further investigation.

In the field of education research, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue for a revision of “transmission” based understandings of feedback processes, suggesting that students do not necessarily read and apply feedback the way it was intended. Their model offers seven suggestions for ways to help students better understand and assimilate the feedback they receive. Suggestions such as self-assessment and connecting feedback to learning goals are both strategies that many Elon faculty already employ.

But, these useful and worthy suggestions help teachers understand how to give feedback, not what students do with it. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that feedback was always offered in the ideal way that these theorists suggest, what changes about how students *use* that feedback? What are the possibilities for how feedback might be used by students and are we as teacher-scholars certain that we understand those possibilities sufficiently? Just in terms of writing instruction, it matters if students are using feedback to structure their revision process or if they are incorporating it as a jumping off point for invention or brainstorming. As another example, do students assume teachers always have the right answer and thus read feedback as if questions are politely phrased directives and suggestions are thinly veiled corrections? Do students even read comments at all, and if so, which ones?

Improving feedback practices so that students increasingly do what we want them to does not necessarily mean that they are learning more or that the quality of their learning is transformative. It might just mean that we are getting better at educating students about our own preferences and desires. We should never underestimate the ability of students to become adept at using our ‘tells’ to intellectually and performatively game the system – especially when their ability to function according to the system is what we are evaluating. Improving our feedback based on an analysis of student outcomes (grades/ assessment) might include an assumption that all learning is already known and knowable by the teacher. This means that grades could be seen as proof that the intended parcel of knowledge was successfully acquired by the student. He/she followed feedback cues appropriately in order to assimilate the intended knowledge correctly, and that activity is reflected by student performances on tests or other metrics. This transmission idea doesn’t translate well to practice-based learning such as writing. It also does not allow for the surprises, the ways that student learning drives teacher learning in an ongoing, recursive process.

In making space for recursivity, I wish to approach feedback situations as dialogic discussions, similar to the definition described by Brookfield and Preskill (2005). This means that the response of students to the feedback must be considered valuable to the extent of possibly re-shaping the original claim by the teacher. To be perceived as valuable, student responses need to be invited. This cannot happen if teachers are seen

as the ultimate authorities, which leads me to wonder if part of the devaluing of peer feedback, (as hinted by Lin's study), is the assumption of teacher feedback as one-way. How can students see themselves in a dialogue if they view feedback as judgment rather than advice that they might not have to take exactly? Students may ignore feedback, but how often do they openly refute or engage with it? The point being that students might respond to feedback in the same way as any number of other one-way directives which *claim* to invite their participation, but don't really mean it. Making ourselves clearer is not the same as making more space for student agency, and agency is required for deep learning to occur.

I want to better understand the assumptions that I am making about the role of feedback in my teaching in order to learn what use it has for students. Then, I want to help other teachers ask similar questions of their feedback practices in order to help them learn how their students are using feedback. Such knowledge can increase the possibilities for how I use feedback in my classes, and can benefit how other teachers use feedback as well. Just as SoTL scholars Gurang and Schwartz (2009) argue in their discussion of pedagogical research, there is no one right way to study feedback processes, and as such, there is no one right way to give feedback. Consequently, this project does not seek to provide the perfect means of commenting on student papers, but rather intends to offer faculty across disciplines a tool that they can apply to understand student uses of feedback in order to derive new feedback practices that fit their specific learning contexts.

Ways students will be involved and Evidence to be gathered and analyzed during the project

The project will have two stages. Stage one will involve investigations in sections of English 110, a class that I regularly teach. Similar to Hyland's study, I will use a combination of student questionnaires, interviews, and think-aloud sessions to arrive at an understanding of student perceptions of feedback and descriptions of how they intend to use it. On a slightly larger scale, as it is common for students to be asked to complete a reflection following peer review sessions in English 110, I will seek to collect entire sections of these reflections, coupled with focus group interviews to identify the role of peer feedback in classes. Barbara Gordon and Megan Isaac have agreed to allow me access to their 110 classes for this project so that I will be primarily researching others' classes rather than my own, although I may use some work from my classes as a jumping off point. Beginning in the second semester of the project and continuing through the third semester, I plan to invite student researchers to work with me as peer investigators, interviewing students and analyzing data collected the semester before, while assisting me in identifying areas for further, more targeted investigation.

In the second phase of the project during semesters three and four, I plan to pilot a strategy for faculty to use in classes outside of English. The immediate goal of the strategy is not to improve the clarity of

feedback, but rather to develop a model that further investigates how students are using feedback on written work across disciplines. The long-term goals are to aid faculty (including myself) in rethinking the role of feedback in their pedagogy, to develop feedback practices that deepen student learning, and to make the most of the opportunity for dialogue. For this part of the project Lynn Huber (Religious Studies) and Lisa Ponton (Chemistry) have both agreed to participate. Since the first phase of the project will have generated some key questions for further investigation, this phase will be more targeted in the data collected. Participating faculty and students will be asked to complete reflective questionnaires. Representative samples of students will be invited to participate in focus groups with student researchers. These sessions will be recorded to aid in capturing verbal responses in addition to written feedback.

Another way that students will be involved will be through the use of social networking programs. Student researchers will engage in monitored discussions with a sample group so that their responses to receiving feedback can be incorporated in real time – or nearly at the moment feedback is read.

In sum, this project will include ethnographic data collected via focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. It will also include textual data from faculty and students, and reflections from the group of student investigators. Students will be subjects, participants and co-investigators.

Project's implications for me

Improving my teaching is the most immediate implication of this work for me. I use feedback for so many different reasons in my classes, and on so many different occasions, that learning more about how students use it can only improve my overall pedagogical approach. In addition, as I regularly teach interdisciplinary courses in the GST program, the expansion of this project across disciplines means that it will provide useful tools that I can apply in all of the Elon courses I teach. I am also excited by the possibility that there are ways of doing, of using feedback in teaching that I have not considered. Exploring these possibilities presents opportunities for deepening student engagement. The scholarship generated by this project will provide important professional development as will the coordination of student researchers.

Project's implications for the community

Since the primary goal for this project is to develop a means for faculty across disciplines to understand how students are using feedback in their classes, its outcomes can be useful to a wide range of teacher-scholars, especially those that depend on written feedback as a means of expanding instruction. I suspect that results of this project will also be of interest to colleagues in composition specifically, but also to any teacher who follows SoTL work centered on classroom research. The deliberate incorporation of student researchers may offer side benefits in the form of suggested best practices for future, similar studies. Students participating in the project will have the opportunity to help shape the investigations, gaining

valuable experience in qualitative research in the process. Student co-investigators interested in careers in teaching or social research will benefit from having a role at various stages in the project.

Timeline and budget

Deadline	Objective	Budget
Semester 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain approved IRB for project. Complete data collection of feedback use in my English 110 classes. Design process for collecting data on feedback use in Gordon/Isaac's classes. Issue invitations for student research assistants. 	\$100 for printing/photocopies
Semester 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement data collection of feedback in Isaac/Gordon's sections of English 110 Manage participation of 2 student researchers Form focus groups Present preliminary findings at Composition Conference 	\$1500 for conference travel \$300 (X 2) compensation for student research assistants*
Semester 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design/ implement pilot of feedback study tool based on English 110 study outcomes Manage participation of 2 student researchers from disciplines outside of English Form social networking groups Collect data from Ponton and Huber's classes 	\$100 for printing/photocopies \$300 (X2) compensation for student research assistants*
Semester 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze results of pilot study Develop revision of feedback study tool Generate scholarship describing the project and outlining the findings Post gallery (on CATL website?) outlining the stages of the project and including content from student participants. Present outcomes at SoTL or other multidisciplinary conference 	\$1500 for conference travel

*I am interested in exploring the possibility of students working on this project as a 499. I have two past students who have expressed interest in such a possibility, and I have experience directing 499/498 students.

If I was able to combine this work with 2 ongoing 499 projects, I would use these funds to supplement student travel to the conference with me.

Works Cited

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