Students' Perceptions of Written Instructor Feedback on Student Writing

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Introduction

Research Question. How do students perceive instructor feedback on their writing when different feedback approaches are presented?

Literature Review. Previous literature on instructor feedback on student writing suggested that instructors take the view of a reader as a way to offer student writers encouragement and criticisms while prompting a sense of audience awareness in student writers (Elbow, 1973; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Shaughnessy, 1977). Shaughnessy, Olson (1999), Hesse (1993), and Elbow (1986) also recommended using feedback as an opportunity to facilitate a dialogue between instructors and students. Kent (1989) and Dobrin (1999) argued that feedback introduces student writers to new discourse communities and their underlying beliefs and that it is important of instructors to be conscientious of this fact.

Previous research of student perceptions of instructor feedback on their writing has indicated that students prefer feedback that is specific and elaborate (Straub, 2000) and that focuses on their writing more so than their ideas (Lynch & Klemans, 1978). Whether students value feedback on grammar is debated in the literature (Lynch & Klemans, 1978; Shaughnessy, 1977).

In this study, I have attempted to follow in Nordlof's (2014) footsteps and move away from the reductionist facilitative-directive spectrum in which offering more explicit feedback is seen as sacrificing student agency. Instead, I analyze the results of this study through a scaffolding paradigm, using degrees of directness to categorize feedback.

Methods

Qualitative data on students' perceptions, interpretations, and uses of written instructor feedback on student writing was gathered through 12 one-on-one interviews with undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. All interviews were conducted by me. Participants were recruited from four classes in the Department of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Feedback Examples. During the interviews, participants read two different examples of mock instructor feedback—Example 1 and Example 2.

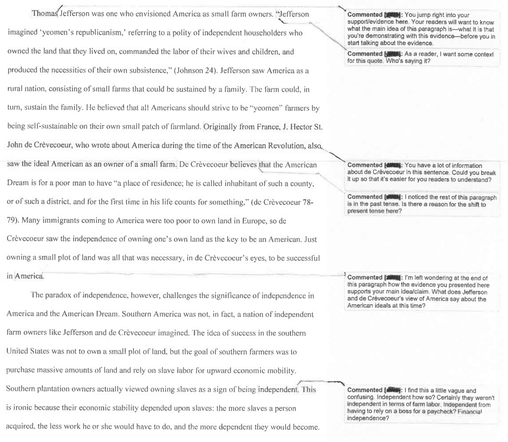
Example 1

Thomas Jefferson was one who envisioned America as small farm owners. "Jefferson imagined 'yeomen's republicanism,' referring to a polity of independent householders who owned the land that they lived on, commanded the labor of their wives and children, and produced the necessities of their own subsistence," (Johnson 24). Jefferson saw America as a rural nation, consisting of small farms that could be sustained by a family. The farm could, in turn, sustain the family. He believed that all Americans should strive to be "yeomen" farmers by being self-sustainable on their own small patch of farmland. Originally from France, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who wrote about America during the time of the American Revolution, also saw the ideal American as an owner of a small farm. De Crèvecoeur believes that the American Dream is for a poor man to have "a place of residence; he is called inhabitant of such a county, or of such a district, and for the first time in his life counts for something," (de Crèvecoeur 78-79). Many immigrants coming to America were too poor to own land in Europe, so de Crèvecoeur saw the independence of owning one's own land as the key to be an American. Just owning a small plot of land was all that was necessary, in de Crèvecoeur's eyes, to be successful in America.

The paradox of independence, however, challenges the significance of independence in America and the American Dream. Southern America was not, in fact, a nation of independent farm owners like Jefferson and de Crèvecoeur imagined. The idea of success in the southern United States was not to own a small plot of land, but the goal of southern farmers was to purchase a lot of land and rely on slave labor for upward economic mobility. Southern plantation owners actually viewed owning slaves as a sign of being independent. This is ironic because their economic stability depended upon slaves: the more slaves a person acquired, the less work he or she would have to do, and the more dependent they would become.

Commented [AW]: Insert topic sentence about small farm ownership, independence, and the American Dream.
Commented [AW]: Omit
Commented [AW]: "According to Johnson,"
Commented [AW]: Omit comma
Commented [AW]: Omit
Commented [AW]: Don't use passive voice. Instead say, '… small farms that a family could sustain on their own.'
Commented [AW]: This is confusing. Reword: "J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur was a French-American who wrote about life in America during the time of the American Revolution. He wrote about…"
Commented [AW]: "believed"
Commented [AW]: Omit comma
Commented [AW]: This is redundant. Omit. Use what Jefferson and de Crèvecoeur said to advance your claim/main idea: "Jefferson and de Crèvecoeur's view of America as a nation of small, independently owned farms represents the ideals of the American Dream. According to this view, independence is a central component to the American Dream"
Commented [AW]: Insert comma.
Commented [AW]: "a large amount"
Commented [AW]: Omit.
Commented [AW]: "financially independent"
Commented [AW]: "financial"
Commented [AW]: Insert comma

Example 2



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The paradox of independence, however, challenges the significance of independence in America and the American Dream. Southern America was not, in fact, a nation of independent farm owners like Jefferson and de Crèvecoeur imagined. The idea of success in the southern United States was not to own a small plot of land, but the goal of southern farmers was to purchase massive amounts of land and rely on slave labor for upward economic mobility. Southern plantation owners actually viewed owning slaves as a sign of being independent. This is ironic because their economic stability depended upon slaves: the more slaves a person acquired, the less work he or she would have to do, and the more dependent they would become.

Commented [AW]: You jump right into your support/evidence here. Your readers will want to know what the main idea of this paragraph is—what it is that you're demonstrating with this evidence—before you in start talking about the evidence.
Commented [AW]: As a reader, I want some context for this quote. Who's saying it?
Commented [AW]: You have a lot of information about de Crèvecoeur in this sentence. Could you break it up so that it's easier for you readers to understand?
Commented [AW]: I noticed the rest of this paragraph is in the past tense. Is there a reason for the shift to present tense here?
Commented [AW]: I'm left wondering at the end of this paragraph how the evidence you presented here supports your main idea/claim. What does Jefferson and de Crèvecoeur's view of America say about the American ideals at this time?
Commented [AW]: I find this a little vague and confusing. Independent how so? Certainly they weren't independent in terms of farm labor. Independent from having to rely on a boss for a paycheck? Financial independence?

Example 1 uses a modeling approach and Example 2 uses a dialogic approach. I asked participants questions on their perceptions, interpretations, and potential uses of the feedback from the two examples. As participants responded to the interview questions, I encouraged them to elaborate on their thoughts and asked follow-up questions that prompted participants to clarify their ideas and provide more detail and specificity to their responses.

Results

Table 1. Study Participants

Participant	Course	Writing Consultant	TWC Major
A	WRIT 3001	No	Yes
B	WRIT 1201	No	No
C	WRIT 3751W	Yes	No
D	WRIT 3751W	Yes	No
E	Recruited by friend	No	No
F	WRIT 3751W	Yes	No
G	WRIT 3441	No	Yes
H	WRIT 3751W	Yes	No
I	WRIT 3441	No	Yes
J	WRIT 3001	No	Yes
K	WRIT 1201	No	No
L	WRIT 3751W	Yes	No

Interview transcripts were coded using an inductive coding method. I determined thematic categories through reading the transcripts of interviews and noticing patterns in the most frequently mentioned words in the interview transcripts.

Table 2. Top 5 Codes by Frequency

	Participant												
Code	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	Total
Helpful	5	3	6	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	6	6	37
Unhelpful	4	3	4	4	1	6	0	0	1	3	6	6	38
Suggestion	2	2	6	8	1	0	1	5	4	3	1	3	36
Revision (thinking)	0	0	6	5	6	7	9	2	4	3	2	4	48
Edit	1	0	9	6	4	3	9	1	2	4	5	1	45

Table 3. Descriptions of Top 5 Codes

Code	Description
Helpful	Participants discussing feedback that they would find helpful or useful as writers and/or students.
Unhelpful	Participants discussing feedback that they would find unhelpful or not useful as writers and/or students.
Suggestion	Participants discussing feedback in which they feel the instructor is suggesting or modeling a possible revision.
Revision (thinking)	Participants discussing feedback that prompts them to think about their ideas and/or writing in a substantial and/or critical manner.
Edit	Participants discussing feedback that prompts them think approach their revision process in a copyediting manner.

Top Five Codes. The top 5 most frequent codes are "revision (thinking)" (48), "edit" (45), "unhelpful" (38), "helpful" (37), and "suggestion" (36). The two most popular codes—"revision (thinking)" and "edit"—likely appear frequently because I intentionally prompted students to think about how the feedback would impact their hypothetical revision processes. At the beginning of the interview, I told students to think of the feedback examples as feedback an instructor might give on the first draft of an essay before collecting and grading a second draft. Additionally, I posed questions to participants that asked them to speculate about their hypothetical revision processes. Thus, participants talked about the feedback examples in the context of revisions and editing. Because participants were asked to consider the utility of these comments in their hypothetical revision processes, the codes "unhelpful" and "helpful" were also popular. Participants readily shared which feedback comments they believed they would find useful if they were to revise the writing and which feedback comments they would not find useful. "Suggestion" was the fifth most popular comment as participants frequently referred to the rewordings in Example 2 as suggestions.

Discussion

Preferences for Reader-Based Feedback. Participants preferred feedback when it was given from a reader's perspective. Just as Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) and Shaughnessy (1977) posited, seeing a reader's perspective helps student writers to notice where the ideas of the page are not yet fully developed in terms of the writer's intended meaning. As Elbow (1973), Brannon and Knoblauch (1982), and Olson (1999) suggested, open-ended questions in feedback prompted participants to consider the relationship between ideas and the further development of these ideas. The findings of this study support Straub's (2000) research in that I found that participants liked receiving suggestions/examples as a way to imagine what potential revisions could look like. And in accordance with Shaughnessy (1977), participants found explanations valuable in learning grammar rules and the language norms of discourse communities.

Feedback and Revision. A common theme from the data across the participants is that the framing of feedback affects how participants construct their hypothetical revision processes. As Straub (2000) found, students tend to see writing through a "form" and "content" binary (or in the case of this study an "edit" and "revision" binary). The type of feedback that students receive affects through which lens of this binary they view the particular revisions that they enact. On the one hand, as Shaughnessy (1977) discussed, feedback that discusses word choice and grammatical structures prompts students to focus on the discursive representation of their ideas. On the other hand, as Elbow (1973), Brannon and Knoblauch (1982), and Olson (1999) noted, asking open-ended questions prompts students to consider the paper holistically and see the relationship between the main ideas that they discuss throughout their paper. However, there might be ways to undermine the student perception of a form-content binary. Asking open-ended questions and then pointing out how students' word choices and/or grammatical structures do or do not provide clear answers to these questions might be a way to demonstrate to students that language is the construction of ideas more so than the mere transmission of them.

No One-Size-Fits-All. Perhaps the most important takeaway from this study is the implications of the fallacies of the "one-size-fits-all" feedback approach and the implications of the notion that different forms of feedback are effective for different students in different contexts. Instructors must know their students—what students know and can do and how students can best develop—in order to give feedback that works best in developing their students' writing skills and habits.

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