Academic Writing Feedback: What do postgraduate students and their tutors understand by “content” and how can the feedback best be provided?

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INTRODUCTION

Improving the feedback provided to student writers has occupied a major space on the teaching and learning agenda in UK Higher Education for some considerable time. To support both staff and student development in this area, initiatives have emerged from all corners of the academy, whether it be university administration or the learning support and study skills centres, raising to the challenge of meeting new expectations for leading the changes in teaching and learning. Because of the large numbers of international students on one year postgraduate programmes, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) units have also developed an increasingly visible role in feedback provision with EAP practitioners working in their own units, in writing centres and online contexts to support the academic writing development of predominantly (but not exclusively) second language (L2) postgraduate students in highly specialized disciplinary areas. Written feedback plays a crucial role in developing academic writing ability (Hyland 2013) and sociocultural theory provides a strong justification for the place of individualised written feedback as essential scaffolding for the development of independent competent academic writers, with skill in academic writing, it has been maintained, best developed within the discipline. Academics with relevant disciplinary expertise would seem to be in the best position to support the writing needs of their students (North 2005, Nesli and Gardner 2006, Murray and Hicks 2017). However, increasing pressures on academics’ time and abilities have further exacerbated the general unwillingness amongst academics for the role of writing tutor to the job description (Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011, Benson et al. 2017). While workload allocations typically allocate an hour to grade and provide feedback on three student assignments, then it is unrealistic to expect meaningful developmental feedback on academic writing as well as subject specific understanding. This tension between the different (and sometimes conflicting) functions feedback on academic assignments needs to fulfill appears to be poorly understood (Li & Barnard 2011, Bailey and Garner 2010). As the majority of academic writing feedback is explicitly linked to assessment requiring grading, a focus on content, language, structure and organization which can fulfill formative, instructional and motivational functions is additional to justification for the grade awarded. To add to the challenge, the staff primarily responsible for providing feedback on written assignments, often graduate students themselves, have a relatively low academic status and are offered little explicit training for the role (Li and Barnard 2011).

Different models have been developed by ELE to respond to these challenging requirements. In addition to generic university-wide support, collaborative online academic writing courses to enable postgraduate students and tutors to interact online with each other, using specific scaffolds to support the feedback process have been developed. These include the provision of extensive written feedback by both ELE writing tutors and subject specialists. The courses were set up to allow ELE tutors to provide feedback on language, structure and academic conventions on specific sections of an academic assignment whilst subject specialist would provide written assignment instructions and could give feedback on the content and argument of the final redrafted essay. The courses take place early in the academic year in order to provide a relatively low stakes opportunity to work through the different stages of producing an academic assignment at postgraduate level. They are generally non-credit bearing although we are working currently with the Business School to develop a version which scaffolds credit-bearing assignments.

Research into our own practices (supported by a PTAS grant) was undertaken in order to improve our ability to give meaningful feedback in often unfamiliar disciplinary contexts. Northcott, Caulton and Gillies (2013) explores the process of writing for academic purpose where one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing feedback on academic writing more explicitly. This blurring reflects the ways in which one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing feedback on academic writing more explicitly. This blurring reflects the ways in which one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing feedback on academic writing more explicitly. This blurring reflects the ways in which one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing feedback on academic writing more explicitly. This blurring reflects the ways in which one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing feedback on academic writing more explicitly.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Although UK universities have focused increasingly on improving feedback, the tendency to isolate this area for improvement is often undertaken without sufficient consideration for the overall context of student dissatisfaction as evidenced in recent student surveys (e.g. HEFCE 2008). As Bailey and Garner persuasively argue, this intense focus on one area is, in part, because written feedback on academic assignments is often the only kind of feedback students receive in UK universities and it has become “an interface between teachers’ pedagogical genres; students’ learning needs; and institutional and government education policies which structure and regulate practices and procedures” (2010: 188).

As the trends towards greater bureaucratisation and corporatisation of our public universities strengthen, it is important not to lose sight of this wider macro-context in any agenda focused on improving the feedback provided to students and ensure that our focus remains on educational goals. It is also worth noting that much of the higher education literature does not engage with the important role feedback can play in developing both general language proficiency for second language learners, evident in the research on written corrective feedback effectiveness, as well as academic literacy for all. Because UK universities (unlike their US counterparts) do not generally provide academic writing courses, feedback on assessed assignments is often the only channel for academic writing development for most students. This creates particular problems for one year taught postgraduate students, the majority of whom are international students. Even those who have English as their first language are operating in a new academic culture with differing expectations for successful academic writing. Feedback thus bears a heavy load, expected to serve as the primary means to both ensure disciplinary socialization and develop academic writing skills in the discipline.

ELE WRITING TUTOR FEEDBACK

Caulton, Northcott and Gillies (in press 2019) considers ELE tutors’ beliefs and practices regarding content feedback, indicating a high level of congruence. The research into ELE tutors’ engagement with content and collaborative writing courses with both social and political Sciences and Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine postgraduates indicated that these tutors often have effective strategies for engaging with content.

SUBJECT TUTOR FEEDBACK

Whilst ELE tutors operated originally without specific feedback guidelines, the subject tutors’ feedback is constrained by the need to award grades according to the University’s Common Marking Scheme criteria and provide comments on specific aspects of the work. An initial comparison identified areas where both sets of tutors appeared equally willing and able to provide meaningful feedback comments. These are identified in Table 1 as crossover feedback. Areas where one or the other set of tutors appeared to demonstrate a greater level of expertise, providing more explicit feedback and feeding forward, are also identified.

Table 1: Areas of crossover feedback

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crossover</th>
<th>Discipline Specialist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Critical/conceptual analysis</td>
<td>1. Structure and organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Strength/cohesion of argument</td>
<td>2. Clarity of expression, presentation &amp; referencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Use of sources/evidence</td>
<td>3. Use of sources/evidence</td>
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</tbody>
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REFERENCES


Benson, C. Disrinphy, A., Kiss, L., Northcott, J., & Caulton, D. 2017. Teaching international students: supporting tutor’s in their work with students whose first language is not English.

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