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# 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, rising 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, Nesi and Gardner 2006, Murray and Hicks 2017), however, increasing pressures on academics' time and abilities have further exacerbated the general unwillingness amongst academics to add the role of writing tutor to their job descriptions (Wingate, Andon and Cogo 2011, Benson et al 2017). If workload allocation models 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 fulfil 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 fulfil 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 to improve their writing skills within their academic specialisms 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 teachers to provide feedback on language, structure and academic conventions on specific sections of an academic assignment whilst subject specialists would provide written assignment instructions and sources and 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 (2016) explores the effectiveness of the collaborative courses from the perspective of student expectations and perceptions of what constitutes effective feedback. Whilst students generally expressed satisfaction with the feedback provided, it became clear that the original, neat compartmentalisation of tutor roles was not as watertight as originally conceived. Students expected feedback on content as well as language. Caulton, Northcott & Gillies (in press 2019) explores EAP tutors' beliefs and practices related to content feedback and compares EAP teacher and subject specialist feedback on content revealing similarities and differences in both the type and quality of feedback provided by members of the different communities of practice represented. We were primarily concerned to what extent EAP teachers could give meaningful content feedback in unfamiliar disciplinary contexts.

## 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 corporatization 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.

## CONCLUSIONS

### 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 on 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

EAP Writing Tutor	Crossover	Discipline Specialist
4. Structure and organisation	2. Strength/cohesion of argument	1. Critical/conceptual analysis
6. Clarity of expression, presentation & referencing	3. Use of sources/evidence	5. Breadth and relevance of reading

Caulton, Northcott & Gillies (2019) presents data excerpts analysed under Categories 1,2,3 and concludes that, EAP writing tutors can, to some extent, meet student expectations for feedback on content by addressing issues in categories 2 and 3, providing explicit feedback on use of sources and evidence and on the strength and cohesion of the argument. However, subject specialist feedback under Categories 1 and 5 demonstrated a level of detail that the EAP specialists were unable to provide. Both EAP tutors and subject specialists can usefully develop students' ability to present content in a linguistically and academically appropriate way. Both can provide feedback that assists content and language development. It is clear that partnership between the two sets of tutors is the best way forward.

In this collaborative model of academic writing development, the input of writing tutors, including the genre-based online course materials, is crucial, also serving to demystify some of the often-criticised feedback jargon (Bailey and Garner 2010). This is greatly facilitated by the opportunity for face-to-face dialogue with both sets of tutors, made available with writing tutors after the initial feedback is provided and with subject tutors after the essays are marked. The criteria for good feedback are met. It is timely, personalized and specific (e.g. Ferguson 2011, Busse 2013). Both sets of tutors are in a position to learn from each other's practice. Writing tutors become more aware of the subject specialist concerns and further refine their feedback practices and subject tutors can make their implicit understanding of the features of good discipline-specific academic writing more explicit. This model can assist in answering the call for a 'mainstream' approach to teaching writing 'that takes into account the complexities of academic writing and the diverse backgrounds of students at UK universities' (Wingate and Tribble 2012: 481). These findings concur with Ingle (2016: 158) who claims that when language and subject specialists collaborate in giving feedback, 'the artificial separation between language and content often becomes blurred and disappears. This blurring reflects the ways that writing and knowledge are not distinct from the meaning and knowledge being represented'.

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