**Interpreting Feedback: A Discourse Analysis of Teacher Feedback and Student Identity**

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JT Torres, Carlos J. Anguiano
Washington State University, Pullman

**Abstract**
Feedback has typically been studied as a means of improving academic performance. Few studies inquire into the processes by which feedback shapes student identity. The authors carry out a discourse analysis of written comments to explore how feedback is discursively constructed by both teachers and students. Analysis of written feedback, think-aloud protocols, and semi-structured interviews work to arrive at an understanding of how feedback is interpreted by both teachers and students, paying special attention to how such interpretations contribute to a student's identity. The following themes emerged as likely interpretations: feedback as a discourse of correction, feedback as a set of ontological metaphors, and feedback as a process of rhetorical listening. The discourse analysis reveals that while teachers tend to interpret feedback as a means of correcting a student's text, students' interpretations of feedback contribute to the construction of their selves. Reflecting on these results, the authors suggest teachers construct feedback as a personal conversation that remains sensitive to the immediate personal effects on students.

**Keywords**
Discourse analysis, feedback, writing assessment, identity.

**Introduction**
Traditionally, feedback has been viewed as a tool that can be used by students to improve their learning. In Hattie and Timperley's (2007) landmark meta-analysis, for instance, feedback is defined as 'information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding' (p. 81). Similarly, Shute (2008), while acknowledging the many ways feedback can be conceptualised, adheres to the following definition: 'information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning' (p. 154). Such achievement-related understandings potentially ignore the social impact of feedback. Take, for example, the findings by Hattie and Timperley (2007) that claim 'self feedback' is of little use. Self feedback, treated as a synonym for praise, led Hattie and Timperley (2007) to conclude that any personalised feedback about the self is 'too diluted, too often uninformative about performing the task, and too influenced by students' self-concept to be effective' (p. 96). While their critique of praise as 'ineffective' is mostly agreed upon by others (Stern & Solomon, 2006; Straub, 1997; Sutton, 2012), their grouping of praise with personalised feedback requires some nuance.

Because feedback is bound by language, and therefore symbolic, its speakers and listeners create multiple meanings. In other words, language is never neutral; it is, as Bakhtin reminds us, 'shot through with intentions', and sometimes these intentions conflict (p. 324). Writing on a student's essay, 'Good job!' can be seen as a throwaway comment by one student and by another as the only compliment that student has received all year, profoundly impacting the way that student might construct an identity.

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The teacher, meanwhile, might have intended for the comment to highlight a practice she wants the student to continue. For these reasons, Brookhart (2008) warns that 'because students' feelings of self-efficacy are involved, even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive if the student reads the script in an unintended way ("See, I knew I was stupid!")' (p. 54).

Currently, much of the literature has begun asking about feedback's relationship with identity construction, and how feedback potentially creates unintended meanings (Kang and Han, 2015; Sopina & McNeil, 2015; Unlu & Warton, 2015; Walker, 2009). In response, this study explores the ways in which teacher intention shapes the feedback written onto students' essays, and the ways in which the feedback is used by students to construct an identity.

According to Ratcliffe (1999), listening and reading are both rhetorical acts that are 'lost in the emphasis on speech and writing' (p. 199). In particular, we ask the following questions:

a. How do teachers interpret their own feedback?
b. How do teachers' written comments reflect their intentions?
c. How do students interpret feedback and in what ways do their interpretations help shape their identities?

**Discourse Analysis**

One of the tasks of discourse analysts is to interrogate the situated meanings of language. Situated meanings arise 'because particular language forms take on specific or situated meanings in specific different contexts of use' (Gee, 2014:65). At a basic level, situated meanings are akin to word associations constituted by personal history, social setting, culture, or political intention. Thinking with situated meanings in mind suggests that the connotations of language use have a greater impact on the language's created meaning than denotations.

For instance, a student might read an instructor's feedback with the expectation to justify a grade while the instructor intended to improve the writing. Many studies have found that instructors and students have competing interpretations and expectations that rarely coincide (Hyland, 2013b; Martens, 2007; Urquhart, Rees & Ker, 2014). During analysis, it was important to pay attention to how feedback was being situated, and what meanings were constructed as a result. One way of doing this was to interrogate the participant's role, his or her stakes in the assignment, and the relationship between the teacher and student to understand how the individual situated the feedback.

Lakoff and Johnson (2008) show how our 'ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (p. 3). According to their work, language is used metaphorically to structure daily experiences as well as the meaning of those experiences. How language takes on metaphorical meaning is always dependent on the situation and those involved. In other words, interpreting meanings from language is an unstable practice, not a given. Despite the fact metaphors often have multiple meanings and correspondences, Lakoff & Johnson (2008) suggest that understanding 'the correlations between [particular metaphors] is the key to understanding coherence in our experience' (p. 81). Because all language is metaphorical and shapes our way of being in the world, feedback is one such metaphor that students engage in order to construct their identities as members of an academic discipline, such as writing.

**Identity**

According to Vadeboncoeur et al. (2011), identity, together with knowledge and values, 'defines a sociocultural perspective on learning' (p. 224). Thinking with this theory, when one learns new knowledge, they become members of a new discourse and therefore develop a new identity. In other words, learning and identity are inseparable and can be thought of as the same phenomenon (Stetsenko, 2010). Expanding upon a Vygotskian perspective on learning, identity is 'negotiated within a particular context, rather than achieved as a result of a stage or age related theory', and identity is discursively constructed 'through relationships with others in social practices that partially dialectically constitute a context' (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011:227). Stetsenko (2010) is helpful in drawing from Vygotsky when thinking about how particular experiences with feedback each play a role in shaping what students learn and how they define themselves. Especially in regards to formative feedback, Stetsenko & Arievitch (2004) provide the idea of a 'meaningful life project', through which the process of identity is never complete; rather, the self is always in a state of becoming, 'enacted through what we do in the world' and the qualities attributed to those actions (p. 9). Because such enactments are constituted through discourse, feedback likely mediates the constant negotiation of the self (Gee, 1990).

To summarise, from the perspectives of sociocultural learning theory and discourse, identity construction is an intersubjective negotiation, achieved via the 'use cultural tools and semiotic systems, together with people in social relationships and practices', constituted by power structures and institutions (Vadeboncoeur et al., 2011:233). An example would be a student who receives feedback from a political science teacher that espouses liberal viewpoints. When that student appropriates liberal ideologies in her writing, she enacts an identity as a 'smart student'. Such an attribute, of course, is specifically situated in that context, in which the power of the teacher constitutes a particular identity for the student.

**Methods**

The current study included a diverse set of participants at various stages of the student-teacher identity continuum. Participants ranged from being students, student-teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, to faculty. Through constant comparison (Charmaz, 2003), analysis inquired into how individuals practiced feedback depending on how those individuals were identified (e.g. student, teaching assistant, professor). In total, five full-time faculty, six full-time undergraduate students, and seven tutors (e.g. undergraduate or graduate students who are also teaching assistants or writing center tutors) participated in the study. The purpose of this sample is to triangulate the observational data in such a way as to avoid the simple binary of instructor and student. This strategy attempts to provide validity to the study by opening up a broader understanding of the discursive practice of feedback. Because feedback is a complex process embedded in the 'discoursal identities' constructed through writing (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014), the use of participants who share both 'student' and 'instructor' identities allows a more complex analysis of feedback (Ivanič, 1998; Park, 2013). A case study approach allows the researchers to explore in depth the individual processes that enact identity through feedback.

Borrowing elements from ethnography, such as the researchers' intent to explore feedback construction as naturalistically as possible, the assignments on which feedback was provided were all designed and administered by teachers as part of their coursework. Assignment topics varied widely, but all were written essays on which students received written feedback on their work.

The participants come from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. Included were faculty in Health Sciences, Biology, and English; undergraduate students in Business, Computer Science, and History; and

tutors in Teacher Education and English. To protect private identities, pseudonyms will be used throughout analyses.

In the first stage of the study, full-time faculty were observed via a think-aloud protocol as they provided feedback on student writing. Following Vann, Barnard, and Sandberg (1994), faculty were instructed to talk their interpretations of the students' writing as well as the feedback they wrote in order to provide insight into their processes, paying special attention to their intentions. Each instructor followed his or her own natural process of providing feedback. There were no assignment prompts, rubrics, or special information that could define the context of the essay's production (e.g. whether it was a first draft, a final essay). These were audio recorded and analysed. The researchers created open codes from the recordings and from those open codes constructed themes of interpretation and practice.

In the study's second stage, the student writing, including the written feedback, was collected. The purpose of analysis was to use the written feedback to help categorise the themes that emerged from the analysis of the think-aloud protocol. Because the purpose of the study is to explore how teachers and students interpret feedback, it remained important that the researchers themselves did not superimpose their interpretations. Thus, Charmaz's (2003) constant comparison was crucial to analysis, as the written feedback only served to compare and organise analysis of the audio recorded think-alouds.

Third, the researchers followed a similar think-aloud protocol as students received and interpreted the written feedback. Students were audio recorded as they read each comment and then explained their initial reactions, both in terms of the assignment and their relationship to the assignment. Again, analysis worked to construct themes pointing to how students interpreted each comment.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and tutors that specifically explored their identities, situated within their academic disciplines, and how such identities had been impacted by feedback. The interview questions focused on the situated meanings of feedback as they occur within multiple social boundaries, such as different courses or at different stages of their academic development. Gee (2014) reminds us that language takes on meaning depending on how language is situated within a particular context. With this in mind, the open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences with feedback both from the point of view as the student and instructor. Reflecting on the shifting meanings of feedback (Gee, 2014), the interviews sought to locate a feedback practice that, considering socio-cultural contexts, emphasises the student's identity as a writer (Park, 2013; Agius & Wilkinson, 2013). Analyses of the interviews helped make connections between the themes organised from the previous stages of the study to tell a coherent story about the relationship between feedback and identity.

**Results**

Three major themes were constructed through analysis. These themes represent the possible interpretations feedback can have based on the date analysed. In the following section, analysis will explore how these interpretations shaped the identities of the participants included in the study. The themes described below are: feedback as a discourse of correction, feedback as a set of ontological metaphors, and feedback as rhetorical listening.

*Discourse of Correction: Achieving Normality*

The first theme is consistent with the dominant mode of feedback expressed by much of literature cited above. Within this discourse, feedback seeks to 'correct' what is seen as abnormal (Anson, 2000). One

example is when Rorty, a Health Sciences instructor, directly states that he 'does not like how the word "socialize" is used in the sentence, …therapy can help socialise patients who are depressed by their injury'. Rorty's expression led him to write onto the essay, 'Word choice'. Moments in the data that seem to normalise student writing to conventions that are personal, such as the above example, or social, such as Standard Academic English, were themed as a discourse of correction.

One particular moment that illustrates both personal and social normalising comes from Bruce, a Composition instructor, who said, '[The way this writer phrases] "black body to serve" does not sound good. They don't capitalise it; they've been capitalising "black" before'. He triple underscored the 'b' in black. It can be assumed that when Bruce claims the phrase 'black body to serve' does not sound good he is judging the phrase against his own personal tastes. On the other hand, his evaluation of the student's capitalisation operates under an adherence to more social standards, especially considering his use of the editorial mark for capitalisation, which assumes students have a particular literacy to read those marks.

What such an analysis hopes to point out are the possible effects of miscommunicating those standards. The students in the current study, however, were often unclear about those standards or their importance. While reading a comment that asked him to develop his idea on fishing, Nick, a college sophomore majoring in Computer Science, stated:

> I'm worried about the page count. I'm already over a page, and he's really strict about guidelines so I don't know what to do. He wants me to expand stuff but also insists I cut down. I'm confused. I don't know if he cares about the page limit or not.

Clearly, Nick can't discern an order of importance in terms of conventions. He wants to remain in the page count because he knows his teacher, Bruce, cares about guidelines, but his teacher never actually comments on or evaluates page counts. Rather, all of Bruce's think-alouds and written feedback encourage revision of ideas and correct usage of style.

A typical response students make is to attempt to satisfy what they view as arbitrary guidelines. When this happens, their attention is likely to focus on the grade rather than the learning (Elbow, 2002; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Treating education like a game, students write for what they perceive is 'correct' enough to warrant the grade they want. This is evident when Heather, a graduate teaching assistant, stated that:

> When you aren't getting any feedback on how to improve then how are you supposed to get that perfect score? I'm okay with not getting the perfect score, but if I don't get it, tell me what I can do to get it in the future. If you don't give a student a perfect score, then something needs to be communicated to tell the student what went wrong.

*Ontological Metaphor: Essay is the writer*

While students refer to their essays as a product of their creation, and therefore extensions of their selves, instructors often frame their references to essays using the ontological metaphor, 'essay is the writer'. Lakoff & Johnson (2003) define ontological metaphors as 'ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances' (p. 25). Therefore, when instructors perceive the essay as having written itself, they create a psychological distance between the instructor and the student. Such distance can encourage an instructor to ignore the fact that a student's identity is inextricable from the text produced.

In some cases, students also framed their references of the instructor feedback using the same metaphor, 'feedback is the writer'. Typically, this only occurred when referencing the typography of the feedback, such as when one student, May, became intimidated by the amount of red ink on her essay. May, a college freshman, wrote, 'Okay so first thing, immediately there is a ton of red pen over the paper and it's super intimidating'. Specifically, it is the sight of the red ink that intimidates May, not the possible implication that her teacher is angry or disappointed. Of course, such an emotional reaction could very well be signified by the use of red ink, but the consideration here is that, from May's perspective, the ink itself is understood to be communicating the intimidation.

Other cases where feedback constructs an ontological existence is when teachers used phrases like, 'The first sentence of the last paragraph is just insane', 'It's a lot of backwards writing', 'I don't really get where this paragraph is going', and 'The final paragraph is pretty focused'. These examples demonstrate a discourse that disembodies the student writers from their writing. It is the first sentence that is insane, not the student. The paragraph is going somewhere unknown. In turn, students disembody feedback from both the teacher who provided it and themselves as writers, such as when Nick reflected, 'The first part says that I have a nicely stated thesis statement'. Thinking with Lakoff & Johnson (2008), the ontological autonomy attributed to the essay and its feedback potentially creates in all involved parties the conceptual understanding that because essays write themselves, and are detached from the human emotions of a writer, feedback does not require sensitivity or personalisation. Thus, Nick might not be alone when he wishes that 'there weren't so many random comments that kind of like, I don't know, attack the writing'. In terms of identity, students learn to view their writing as separate from themselves. They, too, distance their relationship and have trouble defining themselves as writers.

Rachel, a Senior Teacher Education student, expressed that feedback, when it's critical, often feels like 'a personal attack'. However, even when feedback is positive but speaks only to her work, she sometimes thinks, 'That wasn't me, necessarily. Somehow, my essay kind of wrote itself and I got lucky'. In direct contrast to this theme, Rachel expressed the need for feedback to address the student writer as opposed to the student's writing. She credits this kind of feedback as the reason she was able to construct an identity as a teacher:

> I think this goes back to my 10th grade English professor. Teacher. Teacher. I didn't really care about writing or anything and just turned things in. He sat me down and told me, 'You are better than this. Challenge yourself and work harder.' That's the sum of the conversation, anyway. That's the sum. And I was like, 'Oh. He believes in me. Uh oh.' And I cared for the first time. My writing began to have purpose because of his expectations. I love this man.

When asked to provide examples of the feedback she received, Rachel recalled how 'she'd sit with him and [her teacher would] be like, "So. I love this about your writing style" or, "This is great how you're developing"'. The fact that her teacher addressed her at a personal level reflects claims made by Vadeboncoeur, Vellos, & Goessling (2011), that constructing an identity is a fundamental component of learning. In other words, drawing on Vygotsky's (1980) concept of social construction of identity, Rachel learned to recognise her undefined self in the interaction she had via feedback. Treating feedback as a dialogue of assessment can be a powerful way to mediate students' constructed identities (Agius & Wilkinson, 2013; Barnard, 2015). This is summarised best by Rachel when she said her teacher 'commented on her essay as if she was meant to be a writer'.

*Rhetorical Intention: Reinforcing the Dominant Discourse*

The final theme refers to the intentions teachers and students have when reading their texts. Teachers typically positioned themselves a particular way when reading students essays (e.g. as someone with more knowledge); subsequently, students positioned themselves to 'listen to' the feedback (e.g. as someone on the defence). The focus of this study's analysis is how that positioning shapes student identity. Ratcliffe (1999) became useful to analyze moments in the data constructing this theme, which provides insight into how particular discourses of learning become dominant.

By far, the majority of student interpretations fell into this category, where students attempted to understand what the teacher intended with feedback and then revise their writing to satisfy that intention. Different from a discourse of correction, which normalises student writing and identity based on technical standards, rhetorical listening opens up the ways in which teacher-student relationships formed through the assessment process are fraught with power. Considering Ivanič's (1998) reflection that writing is never neutral but implicates every facet of the writer's being, this theme ultimately illustrates how students redefine themselves to write for their teacher's intentions. It also became clear through the data that instructors aren't directly enforcing their intentions. Rather, their feedback is often filtered through what they value, even if what they value is not related to the immediate assignment (Hyland, 2013a).

Heather, who negotiates multiple identities as a graduate student and a teacher, emphasised the importance of being aware of intention. She identified herself as a 'storyteller' based on the feedback she had long ago received. 'I'm a good storyteller', she said. 'I make a good background point to stories. Sometimes I'm a little rough to get to the point, but I provide a lot of background'. In this instance, Heather seemed proud of her ability, even if she is 'a little rough to get to the point'. However, because she had received positive and negative feedback in regards to this identity, she wavered between thinking it is 'good' and 'bad' to be a 'storyteller'. In the following exchange with one of the researchers (R), she appears to be uncertain regarding her identity:

> H: Well. The professor I talked to today said my introduction was a little weak. He said I gave good background points, but… we were talking about the causes of the civil war paper. And he said I gave a good background but I want to get straight to the point. So I guess that would be the first thing.
> R: Well that still validates that you are a storyteller, right?
> H: Yes!
> R: And it's just maybe… some instructors don't want to know about the story.
> H: Yes! Just get right to the point! (Mimicking an instructor's tone)
> R: Well how do you negotiate that, when the feedback goes against your style? Do you like being a storyteller? Would you call yourself that? Is that positive in your mind?
> H: Umm.. uh… in real life, no.
> R: Why?
> H: Well… if… I'm teaching history, it's more fun if it's a story. It will capture students' attention, but in real life things need to be factual. If you are one of those people that just makes up everything, that's annoying to me. And I don't need to hear all your… I don't know.. dramatised personal retellings, then that's no fun. But if you are telling a story then go with it.

Only a few moments later in the interview, when asking her the role intention plays in valuing her identity as a 'storyteller', particularly in the context of becoming an educator, she provided the following:

> H: On the spot that you are asking me that question, I would say a teacher should accept that's who I am. Writing is a very personal style and instructors should understand that everyone has different ways of portraying that. But if it's something like the edTPA, they are only looking for a specific thing and they don't care what type of writer you are, they just want that specific thing… they just want to hear a specific point.
> R: Okay, how does that happen? How do you think instructors can acknowledge the student behind the writing?
> H: My personal thing about being a teacher is that you should know your students, know who they are, as much details about them—if they have intellectual disabilities, special plans they need. You should know who they are before you grade them. Because if you just grade someone off what you want, then that's not necessarily who they are and they can't reach what you want. I feel like a lot of my teachers appreciated my stories and were never a tough grader, but just like writers need to acknowledge their audience, when instructors write feedback they need to acknowledge the student audience they are writing to and grading.

Ratcliffe (1999) provides guidance in analyzing these negotiations. For her, the intent should be to understand the position, cultural logic, and 'voice' of the speaker (or writer). Writing is rarely an act that comes from a single authoritative voice; rather, texts are produced from the multiple voices a writer may 'embody' in order to construct an identity through the interplay of language (Bahktin, 1981). The danger of an instructor reading for her own intent is that she runs the risk of imposing her ideology onto a student writer attempting to construct a self that is, at least in the moment, her own.

Heather had, in her words, written a 'beautiful and clear story', but did not receive a satisfactory grade because she did not write to her teacher's intentions. Thus, how she identifies as a storyteller is troubled by her doubt that storytelling is effective. Following Ivanič (1998), the writing produced shapes the writer as much as the writer shapes the writing. The act of listening, often seen as the passive reception of information, is not treated as a means for text production in and of itself (Ratcliffe, 1999). Often during interviews, intention became the focus of the dialogue. Instructors' feedback often commented on areas where the intent of the student was perceived to differ from the instructors' intent. Students' interpretation of feedback often focused on what the instructor 'wanted' or 'expected'. In these cases, it is clear that students use instructor intent to form their writing identity (Ratcliffe, 1999).

**Conclusion**

When assessing writing, there is much more at stake than a simple set of skills (Elbow, 2002). Students often use writing to construct a distinct identity that is not fixed but fluid and constantly undefined. They do this by combining multiple voices into a single text that then becomes an extension of their selves (Ivanič, 1998). Feedback, assessment in dialogue form, should address the individual student behind the writing. According to the limited data in the present study, practicing personalised feedback helps clarify what conventions should be satisfied and in what contexts, promote the growth of students as writers as opposed to students' writing, and positively position them in relation to their teachers. To put it more simply, feedback that is conceived as a personal conversation may benefit learning, since it is inextricable from identity.

As should be expected with any claims made about the study of language, recommendations about feedback can never be universal or regarded without context (Gee, 1990: 2014). Because feedback is, to use Duffy's (2014) words, a 'mutual intervention', assessment should be viewed as a collaboration

rather than an evaluation (p. 430). Practitioners can remain reflexive about how they position themselves in regards to students' writing—are they seeking to correct students; are they acknowledging the writer behind the writing; are they rhetorically listening to students' cultural logic (Ratcliffe, 1999)? Each of these themes might be necessary at some point, such as using corrective feedback with second language learners (Kang & Han, 2015). What is important is remaining aware of how educators engage students in feedback, especially since students' identities are shaped by the hidden meanings of assessment (Hyland, 2013a). If practitioners think of feedback as a personalised conversation, unique to particular contexts, students are more likely to shape an identity in line with educators' expectations.

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