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Published version

AUSTEN, Liz (2016). Balancing academic gatekeeping and interpersonal positioning: a qualitative analysis of written feedback to undergraduate students. Practitioner Research in Higher Education, 10 (2), 67-81.

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Balancing academic gatekeeping and interpersonal positioning: A qualitative analysis of written feedback to undergraduate students

Practitioner Research in Higher Education
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University of Cumbria
Vol 10(2) pages 67-81

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Abstract
This article will discuss the findings from a qualitative analysis of 136 pieces of written feedback on summative student assessments. The assessment and feedback mechanisms vary in format, and the sample covered all three levels of an undergraduate programme (four courses) in one case department. This article will evidence linguistic variations in written feedback which signify an unequal discursive relationship between the marker and student. This variation is likely to contribute to issues in feedback clarity and consistency. Tensions amid the language used reflect academic gatekeeping, and the interpersonal aspect of feedback, will be discussed with reference to notions of 'linguistic capital'. Assisting students in the interpretation of written feedback, and encouraging alternative forms of feedback to enhance staff-student dialogue will be suggested as recommendations.

Key words
Summative feedback; feedback; assessment; higher education.

Introduction

There is a long history of research on assessment feedback within higher education, with a recent focus on 'quality' (Dunworth & Sanchez 2016) and 'student dissatisfaction' (Nicol 2010, Blair et al., 2013). Looking beyond these restrictions we see that Sadler (1989) described feedback as evaluative in nature with the purpose of explaining the gap between actual and desired performance. This definition best aligns with the summative feedback practices which formed the basis of this research. Summative written feedback was the dominant mode of feedback in the sampled department, and although formative feedback existed, this varied by module and course and was more difficult to identify as a comparable sample. Therefore, this research aimed to critique a single stage in the transmission model of summative feedback. Here, comments are provided at the end of a learning journey, which negates self-assessment and as such, exemplifies the hierarchical nature of the staff-student relationship. This paper presents the research evidence, elicited via a discourse analysis, to support this critique.

Research Context

This research is interested in descriptions of feedback as a social construct (Evans 2013), analysed as a product of the relationship between staff and student (Hattie & Timperley, 2000; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and subjectively interpreted by the reader in a manner which may differ from the writer. To further the work of others in this domain (Chanock, 2000, Higgins et al., 2002, Careless, 2006, Orsmond & Merry, 2011; Long, 2014; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016), this research looks to use a linguistic analysis to investigate the role and function of feedback to undergraduate students, from the perspective of academic gatekeeping and interpersonal positioning. Previous research has highlighted the importance of both positions (see Varlander, 2008 and Evans, 2013 for reviews of interpersonal positioning and Lea & Street, 1998, Lillis & Turner, 2001 and Hyatt 2005 for

Citation
Austen, L. (2016) 'Balancing academic gatekeeping and interpersonal positioning: A qualitative analysis of written feedback to undergraduate students', *Practitioner Research in Higher Education Journal*, 10(2), pp.67-81.

discussions involving academic gatekeeping), most recently brought together conceptually by Sutton's development of 'feedback literacy' (2012). However, target samples and methodologies differ in these examples, and in the few studies that have systematically analysed the role and function of evaluative language in written feedback (Stewart 2015, Hyland and Hyland 2006, 2001, Hyatt 2005).

Methodology

The chosen methodology for this research project responded to the research question - What characteristics of evaluative language are found in written assessment feedback to undergraduate students? - and generated two distinct phases of data collection and analysis. In sum, the research produced a mixed methods case study of four undergraduate courses in one social science department at one higher education institution. The four courses were sampled by convenience to the researcher and purposively based on lower than sector and institutional National Student Survey scores for assessment and feedback. Modules and feedback documents were randomly selected using an appropriate sampling frame to allow for all levels of undergraduate study to be included. This produced a cross section of written feedback to students in the sampled subject group during semester 1 of the 2014-2015 academic year. This feedback was produced by a range of staff members in this department, and did not follow a process of anonymous marking. Sampled feedback documents were initially analysed for content to produce descriptive characteristics of the documents. A qualitative analysis of the language, meaning and assumptions of the staff comments, and the relationship to the student reader, was then undertaken.

Internal ethical approval against BERA ethical principles was sought which ensured: the anonymity of the modules, staff members, and students, implicated in the collection of the feedback documents; that consent was gained from staff members for the use of their written comments; a full brief prior to the semester in which the feedback was written, a de-brief and the presentation of findings for action planning and staff development.

The data analysis discussed in this paper was carried out by a student researcher (who had recently studied in the subject group) and the project lead. After piloting a selection of text, the qualitative free text comments were hand coded by both researchers. Following the principles for assessing validity in constructivist methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), this collaborative approach to analysis strengthened the trustworthiness of the process and attempted to balance any bias in interpretation. This provided an authentic representation of the written feedback provided to students in this case study. To this end the research findings have generated non-generalisable conclusions, however it is noted that previous research has found similarities in the features of written feedback across disciplines (Basturkmen et. al., 2014).

There are numerous ways in which written feedback to students can be analysed. Previous research has been conducted on varied levels and modes of study, and has used varied analytical categorisations. The choice of analytical framework in this research was grounded during inductive coding of the sample. The reflections of the student researcher noted the overtly positive commentary and interpersonal features of the writing. The written comments were therefore coded into praise, criticism, and suggestion, mirroring the framework provided by Hyland and Hyland (2001) and then attitude, engagement and graduation in application of the appraisal framework for written commentary by Martin & White (2005), which focuses on the relationship between reader and writer. These frameworks were selected for their appreciation of the subjective nature of evaluative writing, and the prior use of these frameworks within higher education research. Other analytical process could have been used, including computer generated corpus based descriptions of the sample. However, a narrative overview of the evaluative language found in this sample, using

the themes within these analytical frameworks, is presented to provide an exploration of this genre of writing.

Descriptive characteristics

The sampled feedback was written in response to the first summative assessment task for each sampled module during semester 1 of the 2014-2015 academic year. The random sampling of modules ensured that a range of assessment formats was included (essay, report, presentation, reflection). In total 136 individual feedback documents, spread over 3 years of undergraduate study (Year One n = 51, Year Two n = 64, Year Three n = 21), were collated and ethically recorded. The varied size of modules over the three years did result in a skewed final sample, with the final year slightly under-represented. 93% (126) of the feedback documents were created and distributed electronically (as opposed to hard copy). 84% of the total feedback documents contained a feedback matrix, leaving 16% with only free text written comments. 7% of the feedback documents had a feedback matrix and no free text written comments at all.

The average number of free text words (not including the feedback matrix) per piece of feedback was 100, with the range highlighting a minimum of 0 (no free text written comments) and a maximum of 402 words. The average number of free text words varied dependant on the composition of the document and the mode of access. Feedback documents which were free text only averaged 110 words per document, compared to, for example, documents which contained a generic feedback matrix *and* free text, which averaged 182 free text words per document. Hard copy feedback (hand written or typed and printed; 7% of the sample) averaged 41 free text words per feedback document, whilst comments written directly into blackboard (29%) or uploaded as a Word document (64%) tended to be much larger (128 and 127 respectively). These highlighted variations within the free text comments provided the rationale for undertaking further analysis of only this aspect in the next stage of the research. 127 of the feedback documents included free text written comments and formed a modified sample.

Praise, Criticism, and Suggestion

The coding of comments as *praise* used the following definition - 'an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, skill, etc. ... positively valued by the person giving feedback ... more intense or detailed than simple agreement' (from Holmes, 1998 in Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186). Praise is also integral to the assessment and feedback principles designed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Gibbs & Simpson (2004), which suggest that feedback should encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem. Similar to Orsmond & Merry's analysis (2011) praise was found to be the dominant comment type in the sampled feedback, with 335 coded comments (compared to 223 criticisms and 298 suggestions). Praise was more likely to be used in the first and final year, with approximately three comments per feedback document, compared to approximately two in the second year. The occurrence of positive comments in previous studies varies. Basturkmen et al., (2014:442) found high levels of praise and suggest 'this may be because the expressive function is most commonly found in overall feedback'. Ferris also noted that 'end comments' were found to have higher levels of praise possibly due to framing 'summary comments with encouragement' (1997:327). Hyland & Hyland (2001) also found higher occurrences of praise than criticism and suggestion (lowest occurrence) and Hyatt (2005) found that positive comments were not 'invisible' as previous research had suggested, although warned that the notions of positive and negative are socially constructed. However, Hyland & Hyland (2001) found that students found praise 'useless' and 'a waste of time' if not supported by 'serious comments' and Jonsson (2013) found evidence suggesting that positive comments are the least likely to lead to change. Hattie and Timperlay's (2007) extensive overview of the literature discusses praise under the heading of 'feedback about the self'. They suggest that praise can have little task related information and as such is ineffective in addressing learning gain. They suggest that to be effective praise should be accompanied by

suggestions for improvement, otherwise, as Ferris (1997) also found in feedback to ESL students, praise has only a limited developmental function.

Critical comments have the ability to raise anxiety and depression (Varlander, 2008), especially in feedback which is a transmission of information rather than a constructive dialogue. In this analysis, *critical* comments defined as - 'an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment in a text … emphasises commentary which finds fault in aspects of a text … distinguishable from suggestion' (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:186) - were the least frequent in the sample and were much more likely to appear in the feedback to final year students (approximately four comments per feedback document). It should also be noted that on average, written feedback for first year students contained less than one critical comment, and one first year module had no critical comments in the entire sample.

Comments interpreted as *suggestion* were again guided by Hyland and Hyland's definition (2001:186) 'at the positive end of the continuum … differing from criticisms in containing an explicit recommendation for remediation … a relatively clear and accomplishable action for improvement' - and the principle that feedback should help students self-correct (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006 and Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). These comments were again found more frequently in the feedback to final year students. Whilst overall these were the least frequent comment type, the language of suggestion was the most complex and contradictory. This can be seen in Table 4. and will be discussed again in the section on 'engagement'.

Attitude

According to Martin & White (2003) 'attitude' is concerned with the feelings represented in the text, bound with emotion and the associated semantic meaning. Attitudes are also gradable and can be intensified or pacified by additional linguistic features (addressed below under 'graduation'). The emotive language used within written discourse is referred to as 'affect', where affect can be a positive or negative expression. Although affective commentary in the feedback to students has been explicitly discussed by Dunworth & Sanchez (2016) and Varlander (2008), this aspect of the interpersonal relationship between staff and students has often been overlooked in higher education research.

For the purpose of this analysis, affect was recorded as follows:

Table 1. Affect as a percentage of the comment type.

	Year One	Year Two	Year Three
Praise	9%	2%	1%
Criticism	3%	2%	0%
Suggestion	1%	3%	0%

The sampled subject group was more likely to provide affective praise than affective criticism across the levels of study, with first year students receiving the highest proportion of affective praise, and overall affect, than any other level. For these students the emotive comments included expressions of beauty, concern and disappointment:

> Beautiful critique! (Year One, praise).
> I am concerned that… (Year One, criticism).
> I was a little disappointed not to see much discussion of the motivations suggested in the literature (Year One, criticism).

Disappointment was also noted in the feedback to second year students, along with pleasure, commiseration and gratitude:

> Disappointed not to see… (Year Two, criticism).
> I was pleased to see you consider… (Year Two, praise).
> This is a pity because… (Year Two, suggestion).
> An impressive reference list which is very well formatted - thank you! (Year Two, praise).

Such examples should be considered in the context of student progression. Are comments on the beauty of assessments useful for development? Furthermore, such language is unlikely to be found in an equal discursive relationship such as student peer to peer or even staff peer to peer feedback. As noted, affective comments in the final year were limited, and the only coded reference is an example which conveys the writer's feelings of merit and worth. This code overlaps with the category of 'appreciation', which is also a feature of 'attitude':

> and you deserve your First Class mark (Year Three, praise).

If this analytical interpretation is recoded as 'appreciation' then the conclusion reached is that final year students received no affective comments in their written feedback. The absence of affective comments in final year feedback may be due to shifts in the power balance between tutor and student. This analysis indicates that there may be a more equal discursive relationship in the final year as students have increased experience of the disciplinary habitus.

What are the ramifications of producing non-affective feedback for final year students? Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) found confidence and motivation to be an important factor in feedback, with students noting the benefits of positive comments and the impact of poorly worded negative comments. With a low take up of face to face feedback evident in this case subject group, this concern is in need of further investigation.

Comments which were coded as 'judgement' had characteristics which highlighted social esteem and social sanction. Typically, these codes were most prevalent in year one, with no markers of 'judgement' (either esteem or sanction) being found in year three feedback. Markers of social esteem in this sample were used to draw attention to student effort, capability/potential and expectations for further work:

> You have clearly worked hard on this (and have done all term) (Year One, praise).
> Give these assignments the time and detailed attention they need and I can expect to see some really good work from you next term (Year One, praise/suggestion).

In contrast, social sanctions reinforced processes or rules which had not been followed in academic writing and moral censure based on assumed time spent on task, attendance (or lack of) in seminars, and perceptions of effort.

> You have an academic advisor that has on many an occasion offered one-to-one sessions for all students' (Year One, criticism).

Obviously these sanctions were found more frequently within the critical comments; however, there were instances where suggestive comments were also used to sanction. In the example below, the suggestion that more time is needed is a judgement that not enough time was previously spent:

> Spend some time really thinking about this part.' (Year One, suggestion).

'Appreciation', as the final characteristic of 'attitude', deals with the values and reactions to behaviours or qualities seen in the student work. Within the suggestive comments, the coded examples relate to offers for further assistance by the marker. In this respect, the appreciation is of student need and shows the value and worth placed in student engagement:

> Let me know if you need help! (Year Two, suggestion).
> Please come and see me should you want to talk through your feedback further (Year Three, suggestion).

In contrast to previous findings, appreciation in the form of encouraging extended dialogue was the most prevalent in the final year (12% of all suggestive comments, compared to 3% in year one and two). This again highlights the discursive shift in the feedback to final year students. Staff may place higher value and worth in the work of final year undergraduates as they begin to mirror their own academic commentary.

Other examples of 'appreciation' were found within the praising comments to highlight that engagement was valued. The affective expression of gratitude which was noted above can also be multi-coded and used as an example here:

> Your seminar attendance and regular contributions are also appreciated (Year One, praise).
> An impressive reference list which is very well formatted - thank you! (Year Two, praise).

Engagement

Martin and White's definition of 'engagement' is to 'provide the means for the authorial voice to position itself with respect to, and hence to 'engage' with, the other voices and alternative positions construed as being in play in the current communicative context (2005: 94). There were a number of strands of analysis that developed under this heading. Bare assertions, the single voice of the author, related to either the disciplinary content of the assessment, or the strengths and weaknesses of the student's academic skills. Hyland & Hyland (2001) describe these as 'bald' comments, and found very few in their analysis of feedback at Masters level, but the highest levels in comments which praised the student. In the current study, the most frequent bare assertions commented on academic skills. Across all levels of study, these comments were dominated by academic referencing, *'There are also some sections which are not referenced'* (Year Three), followed by use of literature; *'try to engage with a broader range of literature'* (Year Two) and 'being academic' as a more fluid concept; *'Your writing style … is not academic'* (Year Two). The dominance of bare assertions was evident in Year Three. This feedback was direct and was often presented as a list of positive and negatives attributes, without 'affect' or 'judgement', which provided a clear justification for the mark awarded. Examples include:

> Rationale provided.' (Year Three, praise).
> The last few sentences were inaccurate and contradictory.' (Year Three, criticism).
> Ensure you engage with the breadth of literature available' (Year Three, suggestion).

These quotes again highlight the lack of power positioning in the feedback to final year students.

However, in contrast, many of these assertions contain a range of verbs which could serve to reinforce the power hierarchy between the student and the staff member, as staff members act as gatekeepers to the academic discourse. Whilst is it acknowledged that language is a social construct with multiple voices and interpretations, the monoglossic voice of the staff member dominates in these examples. Tables. 2., 3., and 4. provide an overview of the student's actions which have been

acknowledged and marked accordingly (praise and criticism), and actions which are suggested for improvement, tallied by frequency.

Table 2. Praise (e.g. you have discussed…).

21 used	7 considered	5 applied	1 appraised
20 attempted	7 showed	5 thought	1 endeavoured
12 presented	7 appeared	4 covered	1 understood
12 discussed	7 analysed	4 raised	1 integrated
10 demonstrated	7 critiqued	2 tried	1 argued
8 identified	6 engaged	1 argued	

Table 3. Criticism (e.g. you have not evidenced…).

5 relied	3 clarified	2 developed	1 substantiated
5 detailed	2 engaged	2 repeated	1 verified
5 evidenced	2 struggled	1 appraised	
4 analysed	2 applied	1 misunderstood	
3 considered	2 distinguished	1 elevated	

Table 4. Suggestion (e.g. In future you should explain…).

24 make	5 think	2 create	1 suggest
15 improve	4 look (at)	2 choose	1 grasp
14 ensure	4 (don't) forget	2 avoid	1 apply
11 discuss	3 analyse	2 provide	1 express
10 work (on)	3 distinguish	2 mention	1 tighten
10 use	3 understand	2 write	1 situate
10 link	3 strengthen	2 broaden	1 practice
8 benefit	3 explore	2 seek	1 attend
8 (take) care	3 present	1 identify	1 widen
7 explain	3 add	1 invest	1 display
7 engage	2 try	1 increase	1 cover
7 refer	2 focus	1 clarify	1 revisit
6 (take) time	2 expand	1 (be) succinct	1 compare
6 read	2 build	1 refine	
5 consider	2 say	1 address	

Here we see significant disparity in the evaluative descriptions of the students' assessed work and areas for enhancement. This variation in language and the change in focus (Table 4. is markedly more colloquial with shorter, simpler verbs) could be confusing (Charnock 2000) and exclusionary (if language is reinforcing a specific academic discourse). This is particularly evident in the range of verbs used to make suggestive comments. Lea and Street (1998:167) refer to this directly and note that 'to evaluate and analyse are not generic skills but related to the way the discipline constructs knowledge - these terms can be 'elusive' for students and signify the gatekeeping role of the marker into the discipline'. Furthermore, Lillis and Turner (2001:341) describe this use of language as an 'exemplification of a 'discourse of transparency' that takes for granted the norms and conventions of academic discourse, which potentially excludes student-writers from effective participation and engagement within academic discourse'. This discourse of transparency is also evident in the use of

abbreviations which has the potential to exclude and confuse those who are transitioning into the subject.

Interestingly, the authorial voice, often assumed as the respected provider of academic critique, was then regularly undermined by re-occurring errors in the feedback. As previously stated 18% of the feedback documents contained errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar or formatting within the free text comments. This creates a disconnect between the role of academic gatekeepers and a lack of academic modelling; classically 'do as I say, not as I do'.

Other examples of bare assertions, the single voice of the author, are intensified (a feature of *graduation*) to evidence the frustration of the author. This was a particular interpretation provided by the student researcher working on this research project.

> Your referencing is extremely poor (Year Two, criticism)
> ... again this is a limited response … you have merely described the findings of that one piece of literature (Year Two, criticism)

There were more elaborate findings categorised as heteroglossic, where alternative opinions, positive and negative, position the author's own view against varied possibilities. The first is the use of projection/personal attribution, the seemingly personal view of the marker.

'It allows them to relinquish some of their authority and adopt a less threatening voice. In other words, personal attribution allows teachers to react as ordinary readers, rather than as experts, and to slightly reposition themselves and their relationship to the student-writer'
(Hyland& Hyland 2001:198).

Whilst reinforcing the interpersonal nature of the commentary by softening the force of criticism, personal framing could question the 'fairness' of the feedback (is the work being marked against an expected standard/criteria or the views of the marker?) and the usefulness of feedback as a formative tool (if the marker of the next assessment differs).

Table 5, Personal attribution as a percentage of comment type

	Year One	Year Two	Year Three
Praise	2%	7%	0%
Criticism	5%	11%	0%
Suggestion	9%	16%	0%

No personal attribution was found in the feedback to final year students. This again highlights a shift in the discursive relationship which has moved away from building or maintaining the interpersonal relationship with the student. Example phrases from Year One and Two included:

> I'm afraid I can't give you credit for (Year One, criticism).
> I'd avoid raising further question in your writing (Year Two, criticism).

The presence of modal verbs or hedges can also be a signifier of heteroglossic comments, and in turn portray a sense of uncertainty in the marking process. Examples of phrases which add the notion of uncertainty include,

> You seem to use reflection effectively' (Year One, praise)
> You appear to have undertaken some relevant research'(Year Two, praise)

Your assignment probably just reaches 2, 1 grade (Year Three, praise).

In their analysis of tutor comments Lillis & Turner (2001:60) also found that 'The tutor's hedging in her comments suggest that definitions of the terms she [tutor] is signalling are optional, whereas in fact she views them as obligatory'. Such examples are also found in this current study, more evident in suggestive comments *('You could have explained', 'You could have critiqued')*.

Hedges were most commonly found in critical commentary (mirroring the findings of Hyland & Hyland 2001) and were also used to soften the impact on the reader and maintain a positive interpersonal relationship ('force/graduation'). However, this sample of feedback also hedged praise.

Table 6. Hedges as a percentage of comment type.

	Year One	Year Two	Year Three
Praise	2%	7%	6%
Criticism	10%	16%	17%
Suggestion	4%	9%	0%

Whilst hedging is noted for its unsettling impact, it is also a feature of academic writing (Ken Hyland has written extensively on this topic). Hedging is interpreted by analysts of academic discourse as 'any linguistic means used to indicate either a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, or b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically' (Hyland 1998:1). Here we find more evidence of language which may confuse or contradict the messages interpreted by student readers.

Graduation

Finally, graduation is similarly concerned with the writers 'interpersonal positioning' and provides examples of 'the degree of the speaker/writer's intensity, or the degree of their investment in the utterance' (Stewart 2005:135). The linguistic features noted in this section amplify language via 'force' (e.g. imperatives and interrogatives and modal verbs), and 'focus' (sharpening or softening of attitude and engagement).

Imperative and interrogative use was evident in the sample of feedback, not to add force to praise, criticism and suggestion, but to reinforce bare assertions. In the first year, exclamation marks (imperatives) were used positively to provide support and encouragement. In year two and three, imperatives tended to intensify importance:

Try to go a bit slower! (Year One).
Use all your words! (Year Two).
Seek assistance and guidance with referencing! (Year Three).

There was more evidence of the use of interrogatives in the sample and they were seen to highlight frustration 'as a categorical assertion that the point is not 'correct'.' (Lea & Street 1998:169) - or were more commonly used rhetorically to highlight where the student should have progressed their discussion:

A page number for a direct quote??? (Year One).
Are there any critical comments you could add in? (Year Two).

Finally, questioning was also used as an indirect criticism on the assumption that the answer to the question highlights the student's weaknesses:

> Did this come from Hudson's book? (Year Two).
> Do you need some help with blackboard functions, or were there issues with the question itself here? (Year Two).

These examples reinforce the power imbalance between the author and the audience, the student and the tutor, based on the tutor's 'right to criticise' (Lea & Street 1998:169). The tutor has the ability to add 'force' to the feedback and in doing so reaffirms their position as the expert. The choice of modal verbs and adjectives used in feedback, some of which are also coded as affective, are also a symbol of this hierarchy. This research found huge variation in the language chosen to add force to the evaluative comments. An overview of the content of praising and critical comments used to add 'force' can be seen in Table 7. and 8.

Table 7. Praise.

87 good	6 lovely	2 insightful	1 reasonable
49 well (27 well done)	5 interesting	2 appropriate	1 insightful
21 clear	5 strong	2 sophisticated	1 concise/ly
17 excellent	4 effective/ly	1 engaging	1 capable
14 relevant	3 decent	1 impressive	1 tight
12 clearly	2 beautiful	1 accurate	1 thorough
8 nice	2 coherent	1 fluid	1 fantastic
8 detailed	2 great	1 fine	1 reasonable

Table 8. Criticism.

12 descriptive	3 outdated	2 incomplete	1 sketchy
9 lacking	3 confused	2 broad	1 not academic
7 limited	3 accurately (+ve)	1 nervous	1 generic
6 not/un critical	2 awkward	1 clumsy	1 missing
4 short	2 vague	1 muddled	1 non-existent
4 odd	2 sloppy	1 unclear	1 repetitive
4 poor	2 abstract	1 reliant	
3 shallow	2 detailed	1 loose	

In contrast, the use of colloquial language was also coded and can be used as evidence of negative force, promoting the interpersonal relationship by softening the impact on the student. In these examples, the coding overlaps with examples of hedging and personal attribution. These comments also tended to use contractions, which alongside informal phrasing, again provides evidence of a lack of modelling of the expected academic discourse.

> You might like to try to re-write your opening para to see how super-sharp you can get it (Year Two, suggestion)

The use of hedges to sustain the interpersonal relationship between staff and student can also be categorised as 'focus' under the umbrella of 'graduation'. In critical comments, hedging can be used as mitigation to soften the impact on the student. This was a technique used most frequently in the

feedback to final year students. This is more obvious in critical comments, but as Hyland and Hyland (2001:198) suggest, hedged praise 'might work for the writer as a rephrased criticism, simply prefacing a criticism or signalling a problem in a way which is less threatening to the teacher–student relationship'. They supplement this finding with student views which confirm that hedged comments are also likely to be misinterpreted. Examples of hedges used for graduation in this sample include:

> I was a little disappointed not to see… (Year One, criticism).
> Relying on only 4 references is unlikely to lead to a good grade' (Year Three, criticism).

In response to the research question - What characteristics of evaluative language are found in written assessment feedback to undergraduate students? - the key findings of this paper can be summarised as follows:

- Overall, the written feedback to students in this sample was dominated by comments coded as 'praise'. The developmental function of this type of language needs to be considered alongside the impact on student motivation.

- There is an apparent distinction in the use of language in feedback which is written for first year and final year students. These distinctions were noted in multiple themes including the use of affect, judgement (markers of esteem or sanction), appreciation (the offer of extended dialogue), and engagement (the dominance and function of bare assertions) and the overall use of interpersonal linguistic characteristics (personal attribution and hedging). The impact of feedback student readers across varied levels of study needs consideration.

- The choice of language used to evaluate student work in this sample, and the potential impact on student readers, was found to be complex and contradictory. Examples include features of engagement and graduation which undermine the positive interpersonal relationship being built with students through the use of language. This is conceptualised as a tension between interpersonal positioning and academic gatekeeping.

- This analysis highlights the complex use of 'hedging', which can have a positive interpersonal function when used within critical commentary. Of significant interest is the use of hedging within comments which elicit praise (a distinct feature of this research), which has the potential to undermine the positive commentary and add to contradictory evaluatory messages.

Discussion

This research has provided a multi-layered qualitative analysis of written feedback given to students on summative assessments. This analysis supports the social constructivist assumptions about the nature of feedback by focusing on the subjective meaning hidden within the lexico-grammatical features of the text. Within the thematic categories, two diverse overarching themes were identified - that the subject group were torn between using language to gate keep academic conventions and using language to build interpersonal relationships with their students. This paper suggests that this contradiction is further mediated by fluctuations in 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1977). As Thompson (1991 in Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991:2) notes, Bourdieu:

> Portrays everyday linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of social structure that is both expresses and helps to reproduce.

These themes have been identified in a feedback context by others; Lea & Street (1998), Lillis & Turner (2001), Hyatt (2005), and Basturkmen et al. (2014) discuss the use of feedback as a means of inducting students into an academic community, especially using disciplinary terminology and conventions for written work. Hyatt codes 'phatic comments' as part of his analysis 'whose purpose is the establishment and maintenance of a good academic and social relationship between the tutor and the student' (2005:344) and Dunworth & Sanchez (2016) discuss the interpersonal as one dimension of quality feedback. Stewart notes that 'representational, interpersonal and textual aspects of language interact closely' (2015:2), such that the interpersonal aspect is often competing with textual and representational aspects of academic discourse. Stewart also uses the Appraisal Framework of Martin & White (2005) to analyse student comments in institutional surveys. The Academic Literacies approach discusses limitations with the academic skills and academic socialisation approaches (Lea & Street, 1998), which were both features of the theme 'academic discourse' and comment directly on writing as a social practice. However, this notable approach fails to include the competing agenda of staff-student 'interpersonal discourse', specifically because the focus has been on student writing rather than staff feedback. This is now being addressed with a reframed focus on 'feedback literacy'. Sutton (2012) has highlighted the interpersonal via the notion of 'care' and summarised that 'the way in which academics articulate their educational identities within the social relations of learning and teaching appears to have the potential to either enable or constrain the development of feedback literacy' (ibid:39).

The analysis of comments categorised as 'attitude' and 'appreciation' showed that by using emotive or motivational language, judgements of esteem or sanctions and expressions of value and worth, feedback comments could build or maintain a sound interpersonal relationship with the student, especially in the first year of study. However, this language also reinforces the unequal discursive relationship between author and reader, staff member and student. This can be seen in a shift in use and frequency of attitudinal comments to final year students, where the academic commentary starts to mirror the academy and thus the linguistic capital of the student is greater. Comments which were coded as 'judgement' had characteristics which highlighted social esteem and social sanction, and are again a signifier of the linguistic capital of the academic.

Comments coded as 'engagement' were separated into monoglossic and heteroglossic features. Monoglossic bare assertions were proportionally more likely to be found in final year feedback, at the expense of 'attitude'. However, the type of comments in this category predominantly discussed academic skills and by doing so, maintained the elevated power potion of the academic as gatekeeper to the conventions of academic discourse. This was also seen in the extensive use of verbs. Whilst the importance of the academic discourse is being upheld here, it is then being undermined, not only by the interpersonal discourse, but by the lack of modelling (errors and colloquialisms) by the gatekeepers themselves. Furthermore, heteroglossic 'engagement' comments showed that the sampled feedback used hedges and projection/personal attribution for interpersonal effect, especially in the first year of study. Again, this was much less evident in the comments for final year students.

Finally, graduation is equally as contradictory. Interpersonal discourse was coded via the use of imperatives for support and encouragement, the use of colloquial language, and hedges and interrogative use which offered continued dialogue. In contrast, imperatives which highlighted importance, and interrogatives which questioned a knowledge base, are examples of the unequal discursive relationship.

In light of these discussions this paper recommends that feedback practices need to be discussed and debated within subject groups with a view to managing contradiction and inconsistency.

Similarly, the importance of maintaining the interpersonal student-staff relationship, promoting academic discourse, and managing discursive relationships as competing agendas, should be discussed using feedback examples from a staff group. The use of feedback terminology should also be discussed to note where 'terms are contested and contestable' (Hyatt, 2005:350) and monitored via continuous feedback moderation as assessments are being marked. There is also scope here to look to alternative models of assessment feedback, especially for those who value the interpersonal dimension. Audio feedback (Hennessey & Forrester, 2014), screencast feedback (O'Malley, 2011), peer feedback and face to face dialogue (Nicol, 2010) have all shown to be effective in addressing this aspect, and could aid the balance of 'linguistic capital' and remove tensions in written feedback practice. If the discussions favour modelling of academic discourse, then teach students how to understand the feedback of the group, reframed as another piece of written text belonging to the disciplinary habitus. First year modules which specifically address academic skills, could discuss feedback by using examples from the subject group and include variations in feedback across levels of study (Blair et. Al. 2013). This would develop some level of student involvement in the feedback practice and would create a platform for further discussion as the course progresses. Any changes to the feedback practices of the group should then be properly evaluated.

The recording of student views to supplement and evidence this discussion is essential and should be considered in any future research on this topic. In addition, the use of co-design principles within the assessment and feedback process could begin to explore alternative mechanisms of producing and disseminating feedback to address interpersonal dialogue and academic gatekeeping. There may then be opportunities to engage students in research and reflection as part of the co-design process. Phase two of this research elicited student responses to the same sample of feedback, gathered during focus group sessions. These findings will be reported in due course.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to acknowledge the help and support of the Learning and Teaching Cluster in the researched subject group, the student research assistant (Adam Mama-Rudd) for his interpretations of the data and Cathy Malone for providing comments on initial drafts of this work.

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