Instructor Comments on Student Writing:
Learner Response to Electronic Written Feedback

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Abstract:
Given the ubiquitous use of digital media for writing composition and course management, we were particularly interested in how students use and react to electronic feedback (i.e., comments and editing that we typically use as instructors in Microsoft Word when providing students feedback on their written work). We conducted a qualitative analysis of student interview data to explore students’ use of and reactions to instructor comments in the writing revision process. Study 1 focused on how students understood and edited their work based on the feedback, and Study 2 focused on students’ attitudes toward electronic feedback versus traditional hardcopy feedback. In both studies, the instructors’ comments were made on electronic copies of the students’ written drafts that could be revised and resubmitted. The thematic analysis of Study 1 interview transcripts revealed that unexplained editing changes were often confusing to students and over-simplified the revision process to accepting changes prior to resubmission. In contrast, more elaborated marginal comments that provided the reader’s perspective on the text prompted more meaningful student engagement in the revision process. Student comments underscored the importance of resubmit policies, well developed instructor feedback, and the ongoing need to clarify expectations. In Study 2, students’ attitudes toward electronic feedback were largely positive. Participants spoke positively about the convenience, legibility, organization, and quantity of feedback when provided electronically. These results are discussed in relation to how instructors might provide more effective electronic feedback to help students develop as writers.

Key Words:
feedback, essay writing, resubmission, electronic feedback, student writing, revision.
Introduction

The ability to express oneself clearly in writing is an important learning outcome of undergraduate education programs. Across a range of disciplines, professional bodies have established effective written communication as a key outcome for students. For example, one of the ten goals outlined by the American Psychological Association’s report (2007) concerning learning outcomes for psychology majors is communication skills. This goal includes the ability to write in different formats and for different purposes.

To help students develop as effective writers, instructors use a number of teaching strategies. For example, they typically provide students with specific assessment criteria, offer opportunities for peer revising, and explicitly discuss and model the revision process (MacArthur, 2007). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, instructors provide feedback on early drafts of writing assignments with the opportunity to revise and resubmit, which has been shown to be beneficial for students’ development as writers (Vardi, 2012). Feedback is an important developmental writing tool for students, and instructors can find many suggestions about how to communicate feedback to students (Anson, 1989; Elbow 1997; Lillis & Swann, 2003; McGrath, Taylor, & Pychyl, 2011; Neff Lippman, 2003; Straub, 2000). The need for instructor feedback in the writing process is clear. Students benefit from information about the quality of their work and clear explanations about the assessment of that work (Black & William, 1998). Feedback also helps students improve their written communication skills (Vardi, 2013).

Once feedback has been provided, it is important for students to use the feedback (Christiansen, 1990). MacArthur (2007) has eloquently summarized the importance of this revision process for student learning. He writes,

> When writers revise, they have opportunities to think about whether their text communicates effectively to an audience, to improve the quality of their prose, and even to reconsider their content and perspective and potentially transform their own understanding. To become proficient writers, students must learn to revise effectively. (p. 141)

Revision provides an opportunity for students to engage with feedback and ultimately to become better writers. Despite the obvious benefits of instructor feedback on student writing, researchers have noted that the intended messages from instructors to students about their writing can become lost in the marginal comments of their work. There is concern about comments that are unhelpful and vague. For example, Chanock (2000) found that 40% of student participants in her study were confused by a frequently written tutor comment, “too much description; not enough analysis.” Based on this and similar comments, it is clear that a comment that may seem straightforward to a tutor or instructor is not necessarily clear to a student.

Other research examining the written comments of instructors has found similar patterns. Weaver (2006) conducted group discussions with students about feedback they received on papers. She discovered that students typically reported general or vague comments as particularly unhelpful. Certainly the space constraints of marginal notes on a student’s essay or paper often result in short, terse comments that may be tightly scribbled next to the student’s text and lack necessary details or explanation to
be meaningful. In fact, the ‘old school’ approach of hardcopy submissions of papers may be part of the problem as there simply is limited space for notes. A simple and ubiquitous solution may be to provide instructor comments using the word-processing technology that students use in composition.

Electronic feedback is one more way technology has entered the classroom; it allows instructors to annotate and edit the files submitted by students. Results from studies about electronic feedback are encouraging. For example, findings suggest students appreciate submitting papers online and receiving electronic feedback (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008). Students also appreciate receiving typed feedback and believe instructors provide more cohesive comments when using electronic feedback (Parkin, Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, & Thorpe, 2012). In a recent study of electronic feedback, McCabe, Doerflinger, and Fox (2011) surveyed students and found that they reported a number of positive attitudes toward the feedback, and that they would recommend such feedback for future use in the course. A survey-based study by McVey (2008) found similar results, with students reporting that the feedback provided electronically was generally clear and helpful.

Given these positive results, we decided to extend the existing research on electronic feedback by conducting in-depth interviews with students about feedback they received in this electronic format. We believe the difficulties that have been highlighted by scholars about communicating feedback apply to electronic feedback as well. By moving beyond a student-survey approach typical of past research and employing in-depth student interviews instead, we hoped to delve into an examination of these potential difficulties. So although surveyed students have provided positive reports of electronic feedback, we wanted to know more about how students react to and engage with this feedback.

Researchers who have investigated the complexities of communicating feedback to students have argued for the importance of examining how students understand feedback and how they use feedback (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002). These authors have suggested that “perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to feeding forward into a piece of work, rather than simply feeding back” (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001, p. 274). That is, we need to understand how students experience the revision process and how they respond to feedback given by instructors. Indeed, Calhoon-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013) have recently emphasized this need to understand student response. They have noted that while considerable work can be found about what writing instructors do, less work has focused on the reactions of students to feedback and revising: “a research gap persists between what teachers do when they ‘talk back’ on the pages of student papers and how students react to that feedback” (p. 231). Given this, our work sought to inquire about students’ understanding of, use of, and reactions to electronic feedback when offered the opportunity to revise their written work. By interviewing students who were required to engage with the instructor’s electronic feedback, we hoped that we would provide some insight about the experiences of students when revising their written work. In particular, we wanted to determine the difficulties and benefits that arise when students engage with feedback from instructors in an electronic medium.
This work is particularly important because despite a long and rich past history of research about student writing, recent findings suggest significant improvements in writing instruction at the post-secondary level are warranted. Garbati, McDonald, Meaning, Samuels, and Scurr (2015) investigated the writing opportunities and instruction afforded to students at a collection of universities in Ontario. Their findings, based on course syllabi analysis, surveys, and focus groups with faculty members, found that writing instruction at the post-secondary level lacks a systematic approach which results in inconsistent writing experiences for students. In particular, they found that opportunities to receive and use formative feedback were limited. And importantly, departmental or institutional level support to guide instructors in teaching writing was lacking. Given this state of affairs, studies that continue to explore student writing at the post-secondary level are needed. It was our hope that investigating student response to, and use of, electronic feedback would offer valuable insights to a practice currently used by faculty members. We also hope the findings reported here are useful to faculty members considering the implementation of electronic feedback in their classrooms.

Description of Project

Study 1

A first-year seminar (FYS) course at a large research-intensive Canadian university was the context for Study 1. The FYS topic was human motivation, and 24 students were enrolled in this full-year course (i.e., September to April). As part of the required work early in the fall term, the course instructor created two writing assignments for the students, and they could resubmit their assignments several times, each time receiving feedback and the opportunity to improve their grade. Students submitted their assignments electronically as Word files. The instructor provided feedback on the assignments using the ‘Track Changes’ function in Microsoft Word to create in-text editing changes (e.g., additions, deletions to the students’ texts) and the ‘New Comment’ function to write marginal comments.

Early in the term, the first author was introduced to the students as a researcher interested in understanding their development as writers during the course. The course instructor made it clear that participation in the research was not related to course work, and that the instructor would not be aware of who participated. He left the class while the first author explained the details about the research and made arrangement for volunteers according to the approved ethics procedure. Although only a small subset of students volunteered (in some way reflecting that the students did not feel coerced to participate), the participants did provide a varied sample of volunteers (i.e., variability in terms of age and entrance grade). This sample, although not drawn from a formal process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) did represent key distinctions between students who were enrolled in the FYS with respect to gender, age, and academic background.

The data presented were derived from 13 semi-structured interviews with four students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 24 years and their university entrance grades ranged from 70 to 92 on a hundred-point scale. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the interviews to protect the students’ identities. In total, the first author conducted
two interviews with Betty, three interviews with Dorie, and four interviews each with Wanda, and Jake.

For each interview, the students brought copies of their work along with the instructor’s feedback. Together, the first author and student read the essays and discussed the instructor’s feedback. Our focus as researchers in these interviews was on the students’ use of the electronic feedback, their perceptions about the feedback, if they understood the feedback, and their general thoughts about writing and revising in this particular course. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts following the steps of qualitative data analysis as described by Hays and Singh (2012) and Robson (2011) was completed. We summarized the themes we identified along with an explanation of their meaning in relation to instructor feedback and student development as writers. Each theme is presented as a separate subheading. As the first author conducted all of these interviews, we have adopted the first-person, active voice in the presentation of our results in order to better capture the nature of the interactions in the interviews.

**Study 2**

A follow-up study was conducted to learn more about student attitudes toward electronic feedback, as Study 1 focused on student use of feedback. Students in a third year biopsychology course (class size was 25) at a mid-sized undergraduate Canadian university had the opportunity to participate in the study. One written assignment was completed during the course and students submitted it twice, receiving formative electronic feedback on the first submission. The sample was collected in a similar manner to Study 1: The course instructor made it clear that participation in the study was not related to course work and volunteers were identified after the instructor left the room. Nine students from the course completed semi-structured interviews about the feedback they received. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 34 with GPAs ranging from 2.8 to 4.0. The interview questions focused on any perceived benefits and disadvantages of electronic feedback versus handwritten feedback.

**Study 1 Results**

**In-Text Changes Fail to Support Learning**

Reviewing the text changes from the instructor with students revealed moments of confusion. When prompted to provide their understanding of an ‘In-text Change’, students at times admitted not understanding. I asked Betty about the reasoning for a particular deletion in the text and she responded, “Probably something to do with grammar.” When asked if she could elaborate further she said, “No.” Similarly, Dorie indicated not knowing why a hyphen was added to her text, and when I asked Wanda if she knew why a semicolon was deleted she replied, “Not really, cause I was told to do it.” Jake also expressed uncertainty about changes that were made. “I don’t know if it’s that he actually put the hyphen there or if it’s because he highlighted the word maybe. It’s just… I’m not sure.” I asked Wanda about the helpfulness of the in-text changes and she noted the addition of marginal comments made text changes clearer: “It helps me understand why sometimes, especially when he puts the comments on the side right there, that definitely helps me understand.”

Although in general students indicated confusion around unexplained text changes, particular students did understand specific text changes made by the instructor. For
example, I asked Betty why her instructor altered *motivation factors* to *motivational factors* and she understood why, “Oh cause motivation is a noun, and it’s supposed to be an adjective.” Jake also found clarity in some of the text changes. In one case he identified the following:

Yeah that’s good. The other way was really informal, almost over the top informal, like I was trying to be informal. So saying *in contrast* that’s actually a lot better, cause it really gets the message across that I’m trying to compare one thing to another. Wherein my other one was just, “now a teenager blah blah blah”, and it didn’t really show that I was comparing.

Betty and Jake were at times able to achieve clarity from simple text changes, but it is important to note that these students may have been particularly well positioned to interpret the meaning of such changes compared to some of their classmates. Although enrolled in a first-year course, Jake had previously completed other undergraduate courses in a different program, and Betty had taken writing-intensive International Baccalaureate classes in high school. Without these experiences the points being conveyed in the text changes may have been less clear to Betty and Jake, and indeed there were instances where simple in-text changes remained unclear even to them.

**Marginal Comments and Moments of Clarity**

Students presented fewer moments of confusion when reading the marginal comments from the instructor versus the text changes. In response to the comment, “You’re overusing this word. You could find alternatives such as in sum or taken together,” Wanda replied, “I know I’ve had this problem before, once you start it with one thing it’s like in your mind, and you just keep using it.” It is questionable whether simply changing her wording in the text would have led to this moment of reflection and understanding. Jake also expressed a greater understanding of a longer marginal comment written by the instructor. The instructor highlighted a section of text and noted:

This is a long list of rhetorical questions and it achieves its purpose but you need to really spell that out. What is the common feature here? Is it the issue of goals, or priorities? What is it that you are trying to get your reader to see?

This explanation seemed to resonate with Jake:

I totally kind of agree with it. It sounds like one of those, you’d hear someone saying on a podium just handing out some rhetorical questions. So when you go back and read it you can kinda see how the reader could get lost in, you know, too many questions.

Taken together, students’ reactions to the more elaborated marginal notes was that they were helpful and clarified where the reader was confused and why. This contributed to their understanding of a “reader’s perspective” on their writing as well as an understanding of potential changes that would strengthen their communication.

**Seeking Conversation**

After reading the feedback some students expressed a desire to communicate directly with the instructor to clarify certain points. Dorie stated, “I might talk to him about that and be like this is why I did this, and explaining it to him and then see how he feels
about that.” Indeed Jake had taken it upon himself to meet with the instructor about his paper: “So even though I did well, when I spoke to him about it he was like well you’re supposed to be writing a summary so you don’t have to really follow a structured essay format... I didn’t know that.” So even with a combination of in-text and lengthy marginal comments there were still issues students wanted further clarification about.

**Expectations**

Beyond wanting clarification about particular points in their essays, students also noted the importance of knowing the expectations of their instructor and the expectations for their assignments. Betty wanted more guidance about the assignment saying, “Well, I didn’t like how it was so vague; it was just write about what you think procrastination is. It’s so broad like I don’t know what you want from me.” Similarly, Jake noted, “I guess it’s a learning curve for me too as to what they expect to be in a summary.” As the term went on, students expressed greater certainty in terms of the expectations. Wanda noted an increased level of comfort: “I felt a lot better. I thought he was going to like it a lot better than the first one because I knew more of what he was expecting of me.” Dorie thought that learning about the instructor’s expectations was helpful: “You get to know what your professor expects of you and you get to know what they look for in the assignments. I think it does become easier once you get to know the professor a little bit better.” Of course, the instructor’s comments on written work are all part of this process of ‘getting to know the professor better.’

**Authority of Instructor**

The importance of the expectations of the instructor also became clear in the comments students made around what they did when revising their work. The presence of the instructor looms large as students revise. Betty made a particular edit and said “I just changed it because he’s right.” When probed about her revisions Wanda replied: “I did exactly what he said.” Dorie also followed this pattern of revising: “Well basically I kept it [the paper] as it was, but wherever he put a comment, I did what he told me to do. Whatever the comment said I fixed that.” I asked Dorie if she made additional changes beyond the comments from the instructor and she said she did not. Jake even made a change he did not understand because of a comment from the instructor: “I was really confused by that but I was like okay if that’s what [he] wants that’s what [he] gets, cause he’s the one marking it.”

**Revision as Quick Fixes**

This focus on correcting the written work based on the instructor’s comments may at times have led students to conduct quick fixes of their work. I queried students on the amount of time it took them to revise their work and how they addressed the comments from their instructor. An emerging theme was that, in some cases, students did not spend a considerable amount of time revising their work. Dorie suggested she took five minutes to revise her work and Betty noted it required twenty minutes of her time. Dorie elaborated by saying, “It took like 5 minutes. I was like, I can fix this easily, I’ll just do what he asked me to do and hand it back in.”

Changes that were made to the text by the instructor required the least amount of work for students to accomplish in the revision. The following exchange with Wanda illustrates this point: “When I’d seen that the /ly was deleted, like you could see that it
was already deleted so I just…” “You just accepted the change?” “Yeah.” Other students also commented on simply accepting changes (an option in Microsoft Word) that had been made by the instructor. For each change initiated by the instructor, students would accept it even if they did not understand the change.

Conversely, more open-ended comments found in the margins of the essays required more effort from students. Wanda had some restructuring to do in an essay and noted, “The one [comment] that said it should be in separate paragraphs all the time, took a lot longer than any of the other ones.” But perhaps this point is best captured by Dorie as she comments more specifically on the directness of the feedback and how it influenced her revision process:

It’s probably gonna take me longer cause I’m gonna have to delete unimportant stuff so I can add in the stuff that he wanted. ...They’re [the comments] telling me what I need to do yes, without him just giving it away. Which is good because I would have to go into the article and actually search and figure out how to do it myself instead of him being like ‘You should put blah blah blah.’

**Disconnect between Grade and Feedback**

When interviewing students, the issue of grades arose, particularly in the context of a perceived mismatch between the feedback and grade given. The amount of detailed feedback provided by the instructor at times left students with the impression that their papers were weaker than what their grades reflected. Dorie said “I don’t understand how I got such a good grade. He’s like tearing it apart.” Wanda expressed a similar feeling: “With all the red on the page I don’t see how I got an 8 out of 10.” Using ‘Track Changes’ in Word, documents can give the appearance of multiple issues because each comment is offset in its own text box.

In contrast, Jake thought the feedback on his paper did not justify the grade: “All the other feedbacks were: great idea, never heard that argument before, that’s a really great example. It was just positive so I was really confused cause I was like why did I get a 4 out of 5?” Given the mostly positive feedback on his paper, Jake was confused about why he did not receive a perfect grade.

**Appreciation of Feedback and Revision Process**

All the students expressed positive attitudes toward the resubmission process and were thankful for the feedback and opportunity to resubmit their essays. Dorie noted: “I have never had a teacher that let us revise our assignments. That’s actually kinda cool.” Wanda saw value in the process, “I like getting feedback cause it’s like, this is what I did wrong and you’re telling me so if I fix it I can do better.” Jake also thought this process provided an important learning opportunity: “You can learn from your mistakes. You’re given an infinite amount of times to learn from your mistakes.” Students even suggested the feedback and revision approach be adopted in other classes. Betty said “I really appreciate that [multiple revisions]; I wish more professors and teachers would do that.”
Study 2 Results

*Electronic Feedback is Legible and Clearly Presented*

When asked if they had a preference for electronic feedback compared to handwritten feedback, all but two of the nine students opted for electronic feedback. The reasons given for this preference converged on issues of legibility and presentation, the quantity of feedback provided, and convenience. Participant 1 expressed a common opinion about legibility, “I would say I like electronic feedback better first of all because of the writing sometimes. I could understand if teachers are marking so many papers, their writing might get messy so it’s harder to read.” Several participants expressed concerns about the legibility of handwritten feedback and indicated preferring electronic feedback in part because it improved comment legibility. As stated by Participant 9, “Like I said, if you can’t read it, you can’t do anything about it.” In addition to legibility, participants also found the electronic feedback clearly organized and presented: “so it’s much clearer to read and it’s more organized because in my comments there’s a little line pointing to where it starts notes highlighted in red font so I really like that because it’s pointing to a specific area” (P1). The students seemed to appreciate the way the feedback was displayed electronically, “it highlights a sentence or a paragraph and there is a note attached to it” (P6).

*The Electronic Medium may Encourage More Feedback from Instructors*

In addition to legibility and organization, some participants also indicated preferring electronic feedback because they thought providing the feedback electronically encouraged more comments from the instructor. Participant 5 stated this point clearly, “I realized she could write way more about something than when you are writing in handwriting, because you only have an inch margin... in the electronic I could actually read a whole paragraph about something I had done”. Several students suspected that having more space for comments in the Word document encouraged the instructor to actually write more feedback.

*Electronic Feedback is Convenient and Immediately Accessible*

The electronic feedback was also noted as a preferred method because of the convenience of submitting and receiving electronic copies of one’s paper. Participant 1 appreciated this convenience, “with electronic feedback we can receive our papers back sooner, like right away even if it was 10 o’clock at night. Everybody has phones and everything, we know as soon as it’s posted. So that was really helpful.”

Two participants did not express a preference for the electronic feedback, but they also did not express a strong preference for handwritten feedback either. They thought both methods were similar and they preferred to work from hard copies of their papers. Therefore, even though they received feedback on the electronic version of the paper, they opted to print the paper in order to make changes. Participant 4 said, “I like to have the paper copy so that I can flip through it without having to flip through different Word documents on my computer” and Participant 7 felt similarly, “I still print it out and maybe it’s just that I am not as tech-savvy as other students in the class.” Yet overall, among this group of participants electronic feedback was the preferred method for the reasons noted above.
Discussion

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to explore student use of instructor feedback provided in an electronic format on writing that could be revised and resubmitted for grading. The data collected from intensive one-to-one interviews with a subsample of students in a first-year seminar were analyzed for themes in the students’ interview protocols. Despite previous findings (Bridge & Appleyard, 2008; McCabe, et al., 2011) about the benefits of electronic feedback, many issues that arise in the context of handwritten feedback were also found in the electronic format. Confusion about direct text changes, comments, expectations, and grades were recounted by students despite that Word allowed for long, detailed, and legible comments from the instructor. This highlights that even when instructors use electronic feedback, an ongoing dialogue about writing may be necessary for students to fully grapple with the writing and revision process.

Overall, it appears the longer marginal comments were better understood by students compared to direct text changes. When simple editing changes were made to a student’s punctuation, word choice, or sentence structure, students frequently had difficulty understanding why the change was made. Conversely, well-developed comments in the margins of the text were more easily understood by students and students became more deeply engaged in a revision process (as opposed to “accepting changes” in their Word documents).

Of course, the finding that more elaborated feedback is more useful for students is not novel. Lunsford (1997) has suggested that developed comments from instructors create a conversational tone with students and more clearly communicate the instructor’s point than short cryptic comments (e.g., vague, tense, awkward). If a phrase is simply noted as “awkward,” a student may be unsure about what makes the phrase awkward, whereas a more developed marginal comment could provide insight to the student about the awkwardness of the phrase. While the suggestion to write developed comments is not new, many instructors receive little professional guidance on writing instruction (Garbati et al., 2015) and hence may rely on short comments to convey complex revision issues. Comments that question and provide advice have been found to be preferred by students (Straub, 1997) and in our study students appeared more engaged in the writing process when considering such comments. Fortunately, word processors provide ample space while maintaining a legible font to accommodate such comments.

In the electronic format the instructor’s “good intentions” with editing changes were often misunderstood by students and simply accepted as necessary changes without any real effect on learning. In fact, not only are the students not learning from these editing changes, but it may lead to a misunderstanding of the revision process, as the students are simply “accepting changes” in their word processor with the impression that what is required for a resubmission is a 5-minute process of button clicking. Ironically, this represents an older concept of revision, one in which revision was thought of as the simple correction of errors (Bamberg, 2003). Of course, this was not the response to more elaborate marginal notes that provided students with enough text to have the students question their intent as writers. This more developmentally oriented
feedback was regarded by students as more effective, similar to research findings reported by Lizzio and Wilson (2008). Lizzio and Wilson’s (2008) questionnaire-based research found that developmental feedback was associated with perceptions of effective feedback. That is, feedback that had the potential to feed forward into future work was valued by students (i.e., comments that made students think more about their writing and that focused on helping students assess their own work). This “feed forward” effect was also noted in some of our students’ comments as they reflected on the instructor’s marginal notes that were meant to guide further revision. For example, as one student noted, “They’re [the comments] telling me what I need to do yes, without him just giving it away. Which is good because I would have to go into the article and actually search and figure out how to do it myself...”

Longer comments that appeared in the margins of the student’s text seemed to open the revision process for students, but instructors need to remain aware of the directness of their comments in order to achieve this outcome. Highly direct comments do not allow students to develop as their own editors (Willingham, 1990). For example, in Study 1 students made changes recommended by the instructor without even knowing why. In such instances they were clearly not leading the revision process. Less specific comments require students to engage with the work and “take the wheel” as noted in the student comment above which actually concluded with, “...figure out how to do it myself instead of him being like ‘You should put blah blah blah.’”

As noted, another downside to providing highly specific textual changes is that students can simply accept such changes in Microsoft Word. Rather than pondering why the instructor changed a word or spending time on their own thinking about what change to enact, simple text changes in Word allow students to “sit on the sidelines” of the revision process. When instructors make such changes this is known as appropriating the student’s text (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). The purpose of feedback should be to help students develop as writers and instructors should remain aware that simple text changes available when reviewing electronic files may not provide the best support in improving student writing.

The presence of the instructor was felt by students during the rewriting process both through the comments on their papers and also the expectations they believed the instructor had regarding their written work. The students wanted to make changes to their essays that would please the instructor. This is completely understandable as the instructor is the main reader of the text and the one who will decide the worth of the text by assigning a grade to it. Unfortunately, this desire to please may impede the development of these students as writers if they are only willing to make changes recommended by the instructor (Sommers, 1982). Comments on the students’ papers that asked questions mitigate these concerns somewhat by leaving the appropriate course of direction open to the student. The student must consider the question that was posed but rely on his or her own skills to revise the work.

Beyond discussing revision, the conversations the first author had with the students provided an important reminder that students read feedback to understand their grades. That is, feedback serves both formative and summative purposes. As mentioned above, using the ‘Track Changes’ feature in Microsoft Word can quickly lead to a page covered in red highlights. When reviewing the feedback, students were at times surprised by the
number of comments. They also expressed confusion about how a piece of writing covered in comments could receive a good grade. Elbow (1997) has noted that students have a tendency to view any feedback as criticism. Given this finding, it may be worthwhile for instructors to use different colours when commenting. Perhaps positive comments could be highlighted in a separate colour allowing the student, and instructor, to easily distinguish between the amount of positive and critical feedback. Students in turn, may appreciate the emphasis on positive feedback (Daiker, 1989; Wingate, 2010). Another option would be to comment less. Rather than filling a student’s text with a comment at the sign of any deficiency, we could be more purposeful in our comments, which will ultimately aid us in writing developed and helpful comments (Lunsford, 1997). Of course, the limitation of this approach is that it may require many more submissions and revisions for the student to complete all of the necessary changes required to the paper. In any case, whichever approach is adopted, there can never be too much explanation in class or through course-related communications on websites to clarify expectations and the process that is expected.

Despite the shortcomings in the electronic feedback provided, it is important to emphasize that students expressed appreciation for the feedback they received as well as the opportunity to use that feedback to improve their work. The instructor of this course spent considerable time and energy providing feedback on the students’ work, and it was heartening to learn that the feedback and revision opportunities were appreciated. It was also valuable to recognize that clearly communicating feedback to students remained a challenge with the use of electronic feedback. Students expressed concerns about the expectations of the instructor, noted the role of the instructor in shaping their work, and were also confused about particular changes and comments. And, of course, written comments while important are not a substitute for instructor-student interaction. Even after receiving detailed electronic feedback, students still expressed a desire to speak directly with the instructor about their work.

**Study 2**

Beyond understanding how students used feedback that was provided electronically, we wanted to know what students thought about this mode of delivery. Through interviews with nine students who revised a paper after receiving feedback electronically, we were able to surmise that generally the electronic feedback was a preferred mode over traditional handwritten feedback. This finding is in line with previous work on the positive attitudes that students have toward electronic feedback (McCabe et al., 2011; McVey, 2008).

The legibility of electronic feedback was noted by many participants as a clear advantage over handwritten feedback. This is an important benefit of electronic feedback because we know that students struggle to understand the content that instructors try to communicate in their feedback (Chanock, 2000). Given this struggle, providing poorly legible feedback is likely unwise as it will create an additional barrier in the communication process. In addition to legibility, participants appreciated the clear presentation of the electronic feedback (e.g., highlighting of relevant sections). The clarity of electronic feedback, in terms of legibility and presentation style, is a notable strength of this approach over handwritten feedback. The positive reception of electronic feedback by students should be of interest to instructors.
Beyond clarity, participants also thought the electronic format encouraged more writing from the instructor. Additionally, the convenience of submitting and receiving the paper online was noted as a benefit. McCabe et al. (2011) also found that students evaluated electronic feedback as more convenient compared to traditional feedback while also believing that electronic feedback led to more detailed feedback. Accordingly, the results we obtained from interviewing students about their perceptions of electronic feedback map on well to past findings. Below, we try to reconcile the noted benefits of electronic feedback with the challenges that remain for students when using this feedback.

Implications

Recent findings in writing studies have highlighted a need to address shortcomings in writing instruction at the post-secondary level (Garbati et al., 2015). Providing both writing and revision opportunities for students are key, and the process of giving useful feedback to students is not as straightforward as one might think. The results of this project have underscored the importance of developing a feedback dialogue with students. The most well intentioned comments can be misunderstood by students and changes made to a student’s text can misrepresent the amount of work required to revise their writing. Higgins et al. (2001) have suggested that “feedback may need to be more dialogical and ongoing. Discussion, clarification, and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them” (p. 274). With this in mind and based on the results from our studies, we suggest the following recommendations.

1. Instructors should consider using electronic feedback as it provides legible commentary that students can easily read, within a format they are familiar with. We want students to engage with feedback and they will be more likely to respond to feedback when they can read it easily. Just as we appreciate legible text from our students when grading exams, our students appreciate legible feedback from us.

2. Instructors can use electronic feedback to write developed, but not highly directive, marginal comments to establish an even clearer dialogue between student and instructor. The unlimited space provided in electronic documents easily accommodates readerly responses and therefore encourages a dialogue between reader and writer. Students in our studies appreciated lengthy and detailed comments found in the electronic feedback.

3. When reviewing students’ electronic submissions we must be mindful of the inherent limitations of editing without explanation so as to not distort the feedback revision process and to not hamper the development of students as their own editors. Simply editing a student’s text encourages him or her to ‘accept the change’ without necessarily knowing why. The use of electronic feedback should not communicate to the student a simplified revision process.

4. Even though electronic feedback provides space for lengthy detailed comments, students still expressed an interest in speaking with the instructor about particular points. Including an explicit comment that invites the student to speak with you about the feedback may encourage further dialogue about writing and revising. You could also invite students to submit questions through email or your course management system to
encourage a dialogue even if they are unwilling or unable to attend office hours. Students appreciated the convenience of online submissions so they may also appreciate the convenience of communicating about their papers online.

5. Students appreciated the organized presentation of the electronic feedback found in the Word documents. Therefore, spending time acquainting oneself with the various tools and options in Word may be time well spent. Instructors can highlight passages, insert comments, include hyperlinks to resources, copy and paste common notes or explanations, and colour code changes among other options. Experiment to find what works for you and solicit feedback from your students.

6. Avoid repetitive comments that allow students to be passive in the revision process. As instructors, we noted an interesting potential pitfall that results from the ability to copy and paste comments. A given comment can be placed at all locations within the text where it is required with relatively little effort on the part of the instructor. In this situation, students are no longer required to extrapolate the ideas expressed by a comment. For example, failing to properly transition between paragraphs is a common undergraduate writing issue. Through copy and paste functions, as an instructor it is quite easy to indicate the lack of a proper transition at every opportunity. As a result, students do not learn to identify the need for transition sentences on their own. Rather than copying and pasting this type of comment throughout a student’s paper, one developed marginal comment highlighting this issue may serve the student better.

In conclusion, electronic feedback is still susceptible to some of the pitfalls found with traditional handwritten feedback. But students appreciate the legibility and organization of electronic feedback, and importantly it offers the necessary space for the developed marginal comments that students rely on in order to better understand and improve their writing. We hope the findings and recommendations from this project will be valuable to instructors as they continue dialogues about writing with their students.
References


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