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Feedback in Context: A Case Study of Students' Perceptions of The Role, Value, and Use of Instructor Feedback in A College Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

FEEDBACK IN CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE, VALUE, AND USE OF INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK IN A COLLEGE WRITING COURSE

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This case study investigated first-year composition students' perceptions of instructors' written feedback. Participants reported on their understanding of the role of feedback, how they processed feedback, and if and how they used it. Thirty-one participants completed a short online survey; the responses were analyzed to identify students who exhibited a range of attitudes and practices. From this group, 15 students were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews that included a think aloud exercise that asked them to go over previously graded drafts from their class. The findings of this study support that, although students profess they appreciate and see value in instructor feedback, their reading and metacognitive practices leave much to be desired. They also suggest that instructors take a more active role in talking about feedback, what it is, and what to do with it.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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FEEDBACK IN CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE
ROLE, VALUE, AND USE OF INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK IN
A COLLEGE WRITING COURSE

BY

SUSAN J. ROACH
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Doctoral Director:
Jodi P. Lampi

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Last, I would like to thank those students who volunteered to participate in my study and shared with me their very personal thoughts on feedback.

DEDICATION

To my family who always supported me with their love

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I taught college writing and reading, I, along with my colleagues, often lamented that students didn't use the feedback given to them on their graded assignments. On occasion students asked why they kept getting low grades on papers, and I would point out that, although I had given what I believed to be clear and helpful feedback on earlier papers, they did not incorporate my suggestions. Consequently, their grades did not improve because they kept turning in assignments with the same kinds of errors. I'll admit that I often felt some students must not have read my comments. Why else would those students continue to repeat patterns that I identified as the reasons for their lower grades?

Though I cannot say if those students did or did not read my feedback, these incidents reflect a pattern supported by the literature: college students often fail to take advantage of their instructors' written feedback on assignments (Adams & McNab, 2012; Hepplestone & Chikwa, 2014; Parkin et al., 2012), usually to the students' detriment (Crisp, 2007; Duncan, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jonsson, 2013; O'Donovan et al., 2016; Pardoe, 2000; Redd & Kennette, 2017; Sadler, 2010). My experiences as an instructor and tutor have led me to believe that although many of those students are well intentioned and genuinely desirous of doing well in their classes, an apparent disconnection exists between what they hope to achieve—better writing and better grades on their writing assignments—and their understanding of how to achieve that goal.

Responding to written feedback can be an integral part of the process by which students learn to navigate and progress through their academic journey; this is generally accepted in practice and in research (Crisp, 2007; Cunningham, 2019; Hepplestone & Chikwa, 2014; Sadler, 2010). Higgins et al. (2001) went so far as to argue that feedback is an essential element in the learning process: it is a means for students to examine themselves and their learning practices, their strengths and weaknesses, and to make revisions that not only generate a more effective text but also greater understanding of the underlying principles the learning task was created to teach and assess. The widespread practice of providing written feedback on assignments in academia further supports the belief in its value as an instructive tool to assist students in their learning process and intellectual growth by guiding students to recognize what they need to know, at least for the course in which it is given.

So why is that many students seem to not use this valuable instructive tool? On a basic level, flaws in the feedback itself or its presentation, such as lack of clarity or timeliness on the part of the feedback provider, can be barriers. Much research on this problem has been published as well as best practices for providing feedback to lessen the problem (discussed in Chapter 2, Research on Feedback), but that issue was not the focus of my study. My goal was to learn more about the factors that involve the students' understanding of the role of feedback in higher education as well as their awareness and knowledge of how they could and why they should implement the changes suggested by the feedback.

Understanding students' perceptions of written feedback to analyze the phenomenon of reading and responding to feedback is a necessary step in assisting students' success. Knowing more about those perceptions, educators can modify their behaviors to help students understand and use feedback more productively and, in the process, guide their students to assess their own

performance to make changes that will contribute to academic success. Therefore, the goal of this study was to explore how college students describe the role and value of course instructors' written feedback. However, because this study was limited to a specific group of students enrolled in a first-year composition course, I examined my findings with an awareness that the culture of that setting may have impacted those students' perceptions.

Chapter 1 is intended to provide context and background for this study and is organized in the following manner. I will present a discussion of the problem statement, purpose statement, conceptual framework, research questions, and methodology. Next, I will discuss the significance of the study, its delimitations, and its assumptions. I will conclude with an explanation of the organization of this dissertation and a summary of the chapter.

Problem Statement

Instructor feedback generally is understood to be a valuable resource to assist students' reshaping of their assignments to become competent and academically successful college students. Yet, both researchers and practitioners report that students do not take advantage of instructor feedback to improve their work (Crisp, 2007; Cunningham, 2019; Duncan, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Pardoe, 2000; Sadler, 2010). Much of the research stops at identifying the phenomenon: understanding why this phenomenon takes place has not been a priority. The purpose of this study was to take that next step, to examine how students conceptualize instructor written feedback, how they describe the processes of reading, internalizing, and implementing the feedback in future assignments.

That students fail to engage with instructor feedback has been supported by research (Hepplestone & Chikwa, 2014; Parkin et al., 2012). More importantly, if students in fact are not

engaging meaningfully with the feedback they receive, why might that be? The answers to that question may revolve around four factors that served as the rationale for my study: students' perception of the role of feedback, their understanding of academic discourse, their control of appropriate skills, strategies, and habits, and their reaction to affective elements associated with the feedback given.

The first factor impacting students' response or use of feedback rests in students' understanding of the function of feedback. Price et al. (2010) have identified five categories into which feedback generally falls: "correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking, longitudinal development" (p. 278). Of those five, the first three in the list belong in the realm of summative feedback, telling students what they have done wrong but providing no—or few—indicators of how to make their writing "right." Eckstein (2014) claimed,

One of the biggest misconceptions about [feedback] is that [it is] given only at the end of a lesson or subject once the teaching and learning are over, instead of seeing [it] as central to the learning process as a whole. (p. 58)

However, what Eckstein considered a "misconception" may be the result of the type of feedback given to the students in the past by teachers who saw feedback in precisely this light. If that has been students' perception or belief about the nature of previous feedback, that perception becomes part of the mental models (Brewer, 1987) students create and part of the schema and thinking process (Anderson, 1984; Gluck & Bower, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1994) that they use to determine what to do with the feedback given to them. This could explain why some students might not bother to look carefully at what they consider to be information that no longer has any practical use or impact.

A second complication that clouds a person's understanding of the phenomenon of reading and responding to feedback is that the process of reading does not necessarily result in

understanding what is written. Students who desire to use feedback formatively, as part of the larger learning process (Eckstein, 2014), can do so only if they understand the feedback. College freshmen may be unfamiliar with the academic or disciplinary Discourse community, Discourse being defined as the shared doing-being-interacting of a particular community with shared values and practices, of which language is an important part (Gee, 2013). They may struggle with learning the language and practices of their new community at the same time they are trying to learn new content information. Many institutions tout their first-year experience seminars and programs as bridges to help students navigate the transition, but those programs have limited success (Bailey & Karp, 2003; Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; What Works Clearinghouse, 2016), and understandably so: the transition is a complicated, complex process, and a one-semester or one-year add-on course cannot be expected to meet the needs of the diverse population it is intended to serve. Yet, the transition from high school to college requires students to develop an academic literacy, a way of interacting and communicating with others in that Discourse (with a capital D) community. The tasks given to students are not isolated, personal constructions; they are part of a social practice (Landers & Reinholz, 2015); they take place in a “social context that gives meaning to what we do” (Wegner, 1998, p. 47). As members of academic Discourse communities, instructors will shape—and limit—their feedback based on implicit expectations (Hull, 1986; Shaughnessy, 1977) and epistemological beliefs of each Discourse community (Pennell, 2012). As a result, the language that the instructor uses in feedback may be misunderstood or incompletely understood by the student because of a literacy disconnection. A student’s incomplete or faulty understanding will impact how the student uses feedback (Can & Walker, 2011).

A third factor that might complicate the students' response to instructor feedback is that even if students are able to understand and appreciate the comments left, they might not know how to go about making the necessary changes: recognizing that something must be done is not synonymous with knowing how to get that done (Parsons, 1980; Schoenrock, 1980). More importantly, students might not understand that they need to be independent, self-regulated learners (Sharmini & Kumar, 2011), due to their beliefs about their role in the learning process (Nist & Holschuh, 2005). They haven't developed strategies to use feedback to make positive changes. They may not know where to start or how to make those changes because the concepts and the process are too nebulous and complicated (Mulvaney & Jolliffe, 2005). This is intensified when first-year students are not provided sufficient support or guidance as they attempt to learn how to navigate their new and more demanding academic environment (Keup, 2007; McInnis, 2001). Without guidance, these students may resort to the practices, strategies, and behaviors that contributed to their success in high school in their attempt to be successful in college (Hansen et al., 2014). Their efforts, although well-intentioned, often result in poor academic performance (Rayle, 2006; Thompson, 2008).

A final consideration is that social interaction lies at the heart of the feedback process (Treglia, 2009; Wingate 2010), and therefore context matters when giving and receiving feedback, since "feedback has no effect in a vacuum" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). This is further complicated by the complex, dynamic process of feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Hounsell, 2008; Kellogg et al., 2010), which includes both cognitive and affective factors. Feedback is intricately connected not only to how someone writes (or speaks), but also how someone thinks, what that person values, and to an extent, who someone is. The interchange can

be perceived to be emotional and personal, not merely intellectual and objective, and affective factors may color students' responses to feedback (Treglia, 2009; Wingate 2010).

To better understand the problem, my study focused on the students and gathered more detailed responses about the participants' experiences with and perceptions of feedback on their written assignments. By doing so, we can better determine how students read and understand feedback, particularly students who are attempting to function in unfamiliar academic contexts or cultures in which they find themselves as they go through their college courses. Examining how students describe the impact of feedback on their subsequent writing provided insights into the choices they made in relation to how they understand and navigate academic literacies. These insights can push instructors to reevaluate their own practices as they craft written feedback for their students to increase the chances that students will engage with the feedback. Additionally, the information can motivate instructors to have explicit dialogues with their students about the nature of feedback and more specifically their expectations of how students will use the feedback.

Purpose Statement

As stated in the previous section, students seem to lack of engagement with instructor feedback despite the important role that feedback can play in students' academic success. Therefore, in order to better understand why this is happening, the purpose of this study was to explore how college students conceptualized the role and value of instructor feedback and how that conceptualization impacted how they connected with and implemented the feedback in future assignments. This study examined not only the participants' descriptions of what they did, but more importantly how they described what directed their actions, articulating the mental

modeling processes that took place. Additionally, it uncovered students' awareness and understanding of academic literacy and the Discourse community to which they now belong.

Research Questions

In order to examine the phenomena of feedback, this study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How do students in first-year composition courses conceptualize the written feedback they receive from their composition course instructors?
 - a. In what ways do the students describe the role of composition course instructors' feedback they receive on written assignments?
 - b. How do those students describe the value they place on composition course instructors' feedback given to them on their writing assignments?
 - c. How do those students explain the reasoning or thought processes they employ when reading and using composition course instructors' feedback?
2. In what ways do those same students describe how they have used, or will use, composition course instructors' feedback given to them to improve future writing assignments?

Conceptual Framework

This study was built on the premise that many first-year college students fail to engage effectively with the written instructor feedback given to them to revise and improve their subsequent writing assignments. This study focused on the sociocultural nature of feedback, viewing "communication, thinking and learning as related processes which are shaped by

culture” (Mercer, 2004, p. 138) as well as shape the culture (Gee, 2013). Therefore, two concepts related to the process of reading and applying feedback to written texts formed the framework for this study: mental models, which address the how individuals might process the information provided to them, and Discourse, which addresses the importance of students’ awareness of the context in which they and the feedback are functioning.

Mental Models

Mental modeling illustrates the process whereby feedback can promote positive change or improved decision-making. As the name implies, a mental model is a mental representation of the abstract concepts involved in the learning task (McNamara & Magliano, 2009; McNamara et al., 1991). This model is constructed by the individual through a process that takes into account “linguistic input” together with the individual’s “knowledge base” to form a “coherent whole” (Kintsch, 1988, p. 164). The model can be described as an intersection of two other models: schema and metacognition.

The concept of the mental model is similar to the schema model (Anderson, 1984; Axelrod, 1973; Gluck & Bower, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1994) in that it recognizes that learners bring positive and negative “baggage” to the learning task at hand, including previous knowledge and experience, attitudes, established habits, and beliefs. Though the concepts of mental models and schema are closely related, a strong argument has been made that mental models focus on the reasoning process that takes place and the exploration of alternatives, not merely the network or relationship of information that exists or how information is stored or framed (Brewer, 1987; Johnson-Laird, 1983; Johnson-Laird et al., 1992; Jones et al., 2011). Merrill (2000) defined a

clear distinction between the two: schema is one component of a mental model, the second component being the reasoning processes that employ the schema.

The reasoning component of the mental model requires the individual to resee, rethink, and revise beliefs and practices to effect more successful outcomes. This process requires metacognition, the practice used by individuals to track and analyze not only their own thoughts but also their own thought processes. Flavell (1979) argued that metacognition is essential to one's ability to learn and to know. Metacognition requires taking inventory of one's practices and strategies (recognizing one's schema), assessing them, and using that information to create new or evolving mental models when approaching new learning tasks and impacting future choices (Colley & Bilics, 2012; El-Hindi, 1996).

This process is illustrated in Figure 1, in which the model at the left shows how the learner's decisions are determined by the learner's mental model, or more simply, the learner's schema. Decision making is independent of feedback. The figure at the right, however, shows how metacognitive reflection on feedback can be used to change the learner's previously held schema to create a modified mental model to impact future decision-making: new information is used to modify the decision-making process and perhaps change the rules regulating those decisions.

This dissertation study explored students' conceptualizations of instructor feedback; therefore, understanding what beliefs – or mental models – students brought to college and if, how, and why students modified their beliefs and practices (mental models) when approaching diverse college level learning tasks were two important steps in that exploration. Additionally, the question of how an individual reasons out and makes meaning from cursory written instructor feedback to reshape practices and beliefs, or the metacognitive processes involved in mental

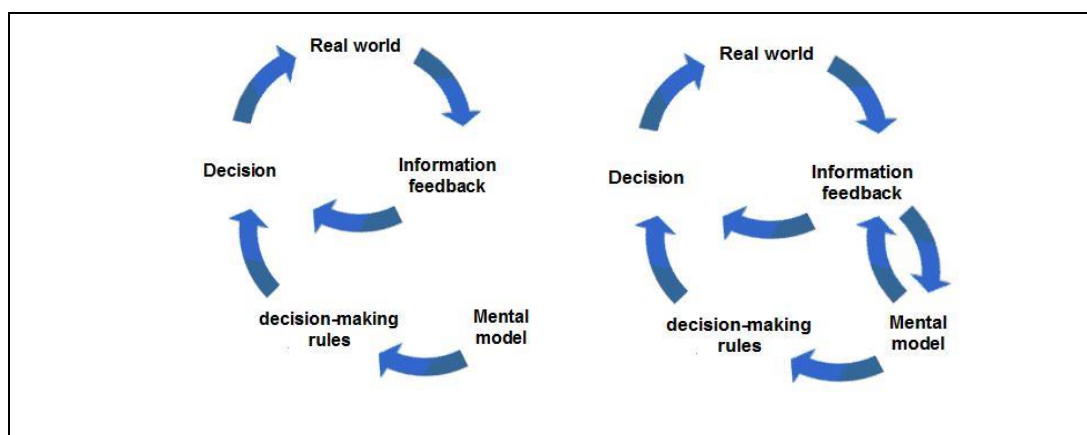


Figure 1. Representation of Two Mental Models (Mildeova & Vojtko, 2003).

modeling, was intricately linked to this study. Approaching this study through the lens of mental modeling provided insights into the complex process of reading and responding to feedback.

However, because feedback does not function in a vacuum (Hattie & Timperley, 2007); feedback is the product of complex sociocultural interactions that influence both its writers and readers, often in very different ways. That is why the mental modeling process of feedback was examined in relation to what Gee (2013) identified as “Big ‘D’ Discourse” community in which the individual was participating.

Discourse

Because the purpose of this study was to explore students’ perceptions of written feedback, with an emphasis on individual response, using a sociocultural lens provided me with insights into how and why individuals interpret and respond to a text, more specifically in this case, feedback. Language and language practices must be examined in their unique sociocultural context, not merely as the sum of abstract rules and systems (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). The

interaction between learner and instructor is dependent upon language, and language is shaped by culture: conversely, culture shapes how individuals understand and use language (Vygotsky, 1986).

Foucault (1972) described discourse as the complex interplay of understanding, practices, and rules constructed at particular points in history that shift in time and place. He claimed that, to determine the meaning of a given text, the reader must ask, “according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?” (p. 27). Similarly, Gee (2013) stated that “language is not some abstract propositional representation.... Rather, meaning in language is tied to people’s experiences of situated action in the material and social world” (p. 137). He claimed that each particular community is shaped by and shapes its language, the manner of sharing ideas, behaviors, feelings, and values, referring to those individual groups as Discourse (with a capital D) communities. One who is not a member of that Discourse community will be at a disadvantage when attempting to interact with that community.

Such may be the case when students enter college; they understand that they are accountable for the content of the courses they are taking, but what they may fail to appreciate fully is that content is conveyed through the language and the practices of that particular Discourse community. First-year college students often have little understanding of the Discourse of the academic community and its literacy expectations, and typically the support students are given when entering the university limited (Eckert, 2008; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). Responsibility for that task often falls to first-year composition instructors (Thonney, 2011), but even under the best of conditions, few composition instructors have the knowledge needed for discipline specific reading or writing, or disciplinary Discourses (Gillis, 2014;

Warren, 2012). Shanahan and Shanahan (2012) pointed out that even content instructors, those teaching content courses, are often not as competent as content experts (professionals working in the field) in understanding and navigating disciplinary literacies. Therefore, college students are often left to their own devices to figure out how to participate the Discourse community, since little explicit instruction is provided.

Yet, despite this disjuncture caused by a lack of preparedness, those students are expected to participate in academic Discourse communities, which requires their comprehension of and response to the feedback their instructors have provided. Their unfamiliarity with the new Discourse communities may result in difficulty and confusion when students attempt to decipher and act upon feedback. Understanding the Discourse of each community, or at the very least recognizing and acknowledging each unique Discourse community, would be a useful component when examining the mental modeling processes that students perform.

The Intersection of Mental Modeling and Discourse

The purpose of this study was to explore students' conceptualizations of written instructor feedback to understand why some students do not to use feedback in a meaningful way to improve academically. Discovering what students bring to the classroom—their individual beliefs and practices regarding feedback—through their descriptions of their mental models is a logical first step toward increasing that understanding.

However, mental models, although uniquely personal, are influenced by broader sociocultural forces. Patterns of thought are components of discourse and Discourse communities (Gee, 2013; Mercer, 2004). How individuals process information is also a component of the Discourse communities. Not surprisingly, researchers have repeatedly shown that individuals

with greater knowledge and experience in a given field are more likely to identify meaningful patterns and recognize strategies to make successful choices (Bransford et al., 2000). Feedback is context-dependent: it, too, is shaped by the sociocultural influences in which it is created by the instructors who provide it, and its interpretation or understanding will be shaped by the sociocultural influences impacting the reader. Brown and DeLoache (1977) argue that knowledge of rules, understanding that knowledge, and recognition of the role of self-regulation or “self-interrogation” (p. 21) are distinct levels of development most often resulting from increased exposure or experience in the given area of knowledge.

Examining the phenomenon of reading and responding to feedback requires recognition of both the complexity of the language itself and the process by which meaning is made as well as the interconnected nature of thought and language. Because language, or more specifically rhetoric, the use of language to effectively achieve the goals of the communication of ideas, is the focus of first year writing courses, I selected participants enrolled in college composition courses. Through the framework of mental models and Discourse, insights into this phenomenon were gleaned, as they related to students’ experiences in a college composition course, providing a clearer picture of the role feedback plays in students’ success.

Methodology

Because the focus of this project was to examine students’ conceptualizations of feedback, this was a qualitative case study using an online survey, interviews with students employing think alouds incorporating their graded essays, and documents that provided insights into the class environment or culture, including course syllabi, assignment prompts, and other

publicly disseminated materials. The participants were students enrolled in a first-year second-semester composition course at a small private college in the Midwest.

This population, students enrolled in a first-year composition course, was selected because first-year writing programs across the United States, though they may differ in curriculum and curriculum philosophies, share characteristics that created a rich environment for this study: these courses typically focus on the process of writing in which instructors' feedback is seen as an important part of the active learning process (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013). The 31 participants in this study, as part of their coursework, were regularly participating in the writing process, and they had immediate and specific experiences with and examples of instructor feedback. Additionally, these students were in the same college course, though with different instructors. As a result, the students' drafts we looked at together in the interviews shared characteristics of the assigned genre, which was helpful for comparison, since similar thinking processes and a shared vocabulary were more evident.

All student participants completed an online survey that asked them to identify and reflect on their experiences with written feedback on assignments. From that larger group, 15 participants were selected for personal interviews. All the interviews were transcribed, and all data from the surveys and interviews went through two cycles of coding to identify overarching themes and patterns in the data.

Significance of Study

The findings of this qualitative study will become part of the current literature that explores how students talk about the role and value of instructor feedback, as well as how students perceive their use of feedback and its impact on their thinking strategies and in their

subsequent assignments. Providing college instructors with insights into students' thought processes when reading feedback, this study may assist instructors to explore ways they can direct their students in the use of feedback when approaching future writing tasks in and out of class.

More specifically, this study explored areas that are under-researched. Although the role of feedback has been a thread for several decades in educational research, earlier research focused on work with students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 (Dinnen & Collopy, 2009; Harber et al., 2012; Keh, 1990). Research involving postsecondary writers targeted very specific populations, such as English as a second language (ESL) learners (Case et al., 2013; Sharmini & Kumar, 2011; Treglia, 2008, 2009), students with disabilities (Roach et al., 2015), developmental education courses (Gulley, 2012; MacDonald, 1991), or students in specific disciplines (Can & Walker, 2010; Orsmond et al., 2005; Vardi, 2009).

Those studies examining transitioning first-year college students typically have taken a “how to” approach toward instructor feedback, using quantitative data to examine instructor practices or feedback types to inform instructors' use of or delivery choice of feedback, to establish lists of best practices (Brunk-Chavez & Arrigucci, 2012; Chen et al., 2014; Kellogg et al., 2010). Less attention has been directed to looking at how the students understand and respond to the feedback itself. Though Adams and McNab (2012) considered students' perceptions, measuring the participants' level of satisfaction with types of feedback, the results emphasized the quality or delivery of the feedback—what happened—but did not examine why the students responded in the ways they did. Perhaps the research that speaks most emphatically to the goals of this study is that of Calhoun-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013), whose pilot study

focused on students' attitudes and use of feedback as a means to explore the partnership between student and instructor in the learning process in a developmental writing class.

In contrast, my study focused specifically on the students themselves, their self-reported experiences as they read and responded to instructor feedback, and the rationale for the choices they made. It gathered detailed qualitative data on perceived processes and identified general patterns in students' practices and beliefs. The intent was to provide a fuller understanding of how students read and understand feedback and how they perceived the impact of feedback on their subsequent writing. As a result, this study provided insights into how students understand and navigate academic literacies.

Delimitations

Participants in this study were restricted to students enrolled in Comp II classes (the second of first-year composition course sequence) at a small private liberal arts and sciences college. All Comp II students in the college were invited to participate in the survey, through fliers, classroom visits, and emails. Those participating in the survey (31 students) provided a diverse pool of responses; the smaller number of interviews (15 participant) allowed for more-depth data collection. The surveys and interviews focused on students' conceptualizations. Additionally, the data collection period was limited to one semester.

Assumptions

The trustworthiness of this study is based on the assumption that the students responded and reported honestly in both the surveys and the interviews. My experience in my pilot study and in other research projects I conducted as part of my doctoral coursework has led me to

believe that for the most part, with proper encouragement in a safe environment, people are honest in their responses. Though some individuals may be less forthright and detailed in their responses, I have found that most people appreciate the opportunity to have their voices heard and to share their thoughts and experiences.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an overview, introducing the problem, purpose, and conceptual framework of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, including a rationale for the methodology, the data collection strategies used, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 discusses the information collected, and Chapter 5 puts forth the implications of the study.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced my research topic, presented a discussion of the problem statement, purpose statement, conceptual framework, research questions, and methodology. It also discussed the significance of the study, its delimitations, and its assumptions. I concluded with an explanation of the organization of this dissertation and a summary of the chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the current literature relevant to this dissertation. Specifically, I will provide an overview of research on feedback in postsecondary education as well as research related to academic discourse and mental modeling, the conceptual framework guiding this dissertation. Because I am interested the relationship between written instructor feedback and the role that academic Discourse communities play in the students' process of navigating feedback given to them, I first will examine current literature on written feedback in postsecondary education. Second, I will examine current studies related to mental modeling and the role of feedback. Last, I will examine the theory of academic Discourse as it relates to reading and responding to feedback. The review of the published research will assist in identifying areas that have not been explored. The discussion will specify how this dissertation will attempt to fill some of those gaps.

Research on Feedback in Higher Education

The belief that feedback is a valuable tool for effective instruction is supported both by anecdotal evidence and research. A four-year longitudinal study (Sommers, 2006) concluded that feedback was the most influential means of instruction to shape students' writing, and most faculty in higher education generally accept that there exists a "significant need for students at all levels not only to be good written communicators, but also to understand the importance of good writing skills" (Defazio et al., 2010, p. 34). An explanation may lie in the relationship between

competent writing and critical thinking, or higher-level thinking, regardless of academic discipline (Bentley, 2014; Evens et al., 2013; Varelas et al., 2015). A report published jointly by The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP) (2011) highlighted the importance of developing “habits of mind” that foster critical thinking, such as curiosity, openness, flexibility, and metacognition, “to support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines” (p. 1) in postsecondary education. Feedback is important not only because it helps students become better writers, but also because it assists in students’ growth as effective communicators and critical thinkers (Ramsden, 2003; Shute, 2008).

However, a common thread in much of the published research on feedback is that students fail to engage successfully with instructor feedback (Adams & McNab, 2012; Crisp, 2007; Duncan, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hepplestone & Chikwa, 2014; Pardoe, 2000; Parkin et al., 2012; Sadler, 2010). This lack of student engagement, not surprisingly, has served as the impetus for much of the research currently published, as researchers seek to find solutions to the problem.

As a result, research on feedback in higher education has been approached from various angles, most specifically the medium of the feedback, best practices for providing feedback specialized populations, and students’ perceptions or conceptualizations of feedback. However, very few studies have explored the underlying causes or reasons for those responses.

Medium of Feedback

In this study, I was not able to control the medium through which instructors provided feedback. Some instructors at the study’s site have embraced Blackboard, an online teaching platform. They require all assignments to be submitted to Blackboard as Microsoft Word documents

and subsequently provide feedback and grades on attached files uploaded to Blackboard. More often instructors preferred writing assignments to be submitted on paper, and they provided handwritten feedback on the drafts presented to them. This variation does not appear to be an issue, however, since the manner in which the instructor feedback is provided has not been shown to make a difference in students' improvement, as shown in the studies discussed below.

Several studies have shown the value of electronic feedback in relation to peer feedback, (Brunk-Chavea & Arragucci, 2012; McCarthy, 2017; Mettinen, 2015); however, those studies focused on the value of anonymity of the process for both the givers and receivers of the feedback. Freedom of identity would not be relevant to my study, since it could not be attained. McVey (2008) found that students preferred online feedback if it could be “inked” or handwritten electronically; they claimed that gave the impression that the instructor actually read the draft they submitted. A study by Walls and Eby (2020) reported very similar results. The survey indicated that students preferred to receive results electronically, but they valued handwritten and face-to-face feedback more. McVey (2008) suggested that electronic handwriting was considered a personalizing factor in the student-instructor relationship. Johnson et al. (2019) reported that instructors who provided electronic feedback were more likely to write more extensive feedback and more general comments, which resulted in student improvement. However, the depth of the feedback, not the delivery, was a key factor.

Most relevant are the findings of Osterbur et al. (2015), who found that “format *per se* does not greatly impact student consumption or retention [of instructor feedback]” (p. 9). They found that consistency in the form was a greater factor; their study supports the claims of Adams and McNab (2012) that students can engage more successfully with instructor feedback when they develop familiarity to move competently through the process.

Though method of feedback delivery was not a major focus of this study, an exploration of how feedback was delivered was noted if it had an impact on students' responses.

Variables in Feedback: Populations and Best Practices

Research on feedback in relation to postsecondary writers often has been limited to specialized populations, or those assumed to be at a higher risk for failure, to determine what practices work best with that specific population. Additionally, those populations are studied to determine the best practices that instructors can employ to assist student success.

One such population is English language learners (ELL), or those for whom English is not their first language. Treglia (2008, 2009), concerned with English as a second language learners (ESL) and their needs, studied their responses to instructor feedback to gauge the value of providing positive versus negative comments when crafting feedback. The quantitative data from both studies supported the use of positive and mitigating feedback to increase most students' confidence, motivation, and engagement with writing tasks. However, although this was determined to be a positive or preferred practice identified by the students in the study, the use of positive, mitigating feedback did not result in a significant improvement in the students' writing. Similarly, Case et al. (2013) also examined feedback in relation to English language learners (ELL). Unlike the quantitative studies noted above, this qualitative study focused on instructors' perceptions, specifically the challenges faced by four community college instructors teaching basic writing, to determine best practices for providing feedback to that population. The conclusion of their study was that, due to the diversity of the needs of their students, instructors could not identify best practices because the students' needs were so great. Sharmini and Kumar (2011) provided more substantial findings, using qualitative research methods, claiming that for

feedback to have a positive impact with English Language Learners, it must be recursive in nature and must be provided in carefully planned stages so that the students can become self-regulated learners.

A second population identified as needing special attention in the area of navigating feedback is students enrolled in developmental education writing courses. Acknowledging the correlation between attitude and performance, Gulley (2012) studied the impact of the delivery method of the feedback, specifically written versus oral feedback, quantifying their potentially demoralizing effects on students and on the efficacy of the method in improving students' writing. Contrary to the previous studies mentioned (Treglia, 2008, 2009), Gulley determined that the students' writing was more likely to improve if students were given positive feedback, regardless of the method of delivery. Similarly, MacDonald (1991), concerned with the socio-cognitive nature of feedback, provided a meta-analysis of studies on instructor feedback, focusing on affective factors faced by students enrolled in developmental courses. He concluded that the relationship between instructor and student and the student's self-image had the greatest impact on how students responded to instructor feedback.

Other studies have focused on other specific populations, including students with disabilities (Roach et al., 2015) and students in specific disciplines, such as the social sciences (Can & Walker, 2010; Vardi, 2009) or the natural sciences (Orsmond et al., 2005; Randall & Zundel, 2012). These qualitative studies have taken a "how to" approach toward instructor feedback, using quantitative data to examine instructor practices or feedback types to inform instructors' use of or delivery choice of feedback in order to create lists of best practices which include turn-around time, the role of praise, feedforward feedback, and delivery choice (Brunk-Chavez & Arrigucci, 2012; Chen et al.; 2014; Kellogg et al., 2010).

The research conducted with specialized populations may well reflect concerns and issues that are relatable to a more generalized population, but that will be determined by further studies; this study may begin to fill that gap. More significantly, the studies noted above generally focused on the quantitatively defined *what* or *how* aspects of feedback (what types of feedback work, how the instructor should be providing it), not on attempting to understand the *why*, or the processes that students claim to employ as they received and responded to feedback, which was an objective of this study.

Studies on Students' Perceptions or Conceptualization of Feedback

Despite the consensus that feedback is a useful tool, a lack of agreement or clarity on the purpose of feedback pervades, as explicated in the findings of Price et al. (2010). They identified five purposes, or categories, of feedback: “correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking, and longitudinal development (feed-forward)” (p. 278). More simply, the purposes of feedback can be placed into one of two categories: feedback can be used specifically for assessment, focusing on what has been done and is completed, or it can be directed toward future activity, “supporting improvements...[and] providing advice and guidance” (Price et al., 2010, p. 279). A common thread in the published literature is the term “feed-forward” (vs. feedback), emphasizing the importance of formative nature of the interaction between student and instructor (Black & McCormick, 2010; Duncan, 2007; Hounsell, 2008; Juwah et al., 2004; Knight & York, 2004; Murtagh & Baker, 2009; Parry & Bamber, 2010). However, though researchers and instructors may be familiar and appreciative of the concept of feed-forward, it is uncertain if college students have the same perception or understanding of the role of feedback. Additionally, the studies used qualitative survey to identify preferred practices. Little attention has been

directed at how the students themselves understand feedback, which was a key focus of my study.

One exception is a quantitative study by du Toit (2012), in which she attempted to examine students' perceptions of feedback, on the belief that students did not conceptualize the feedback given to them in a constructive way. Her findings support that most students did not find feedback helpful to improve their writing and thinking processes. Another quantitative study, conducted by Adams and McNab (2012), at first glance seemed to focus on the students' perceptions, measuring the participants' level of satisfaction with types of feedback. However, the results emphasized the quality or delivery of the feedback, in the end highlighting the feedback itself, not the students nor their practices, which my study addressed.

Two studies speak most emphatically to the goals of this dissertation study. The first, that of Calhoun-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013). They conducted a quantitative pilot study focused on students' attitudes and use of feedback as a means to explore the partnership between student and instructor in the learning process in a developmental writing class, examining students' responses and rationale. Interestingly, their data evidenced a disconnection between what students said and what they did; the students' claims of appreciating feedback had no correlation to the actual revisions on their papers. Cunningham (2019) used a survey to explore if students read instructor feedback and the motivation. Most participants reported that they read the feedback, but they also reported that they were grade-driven, leaving the researcher to question if the population surveyed was representative of the general student population.

In a third study, Lowe and Shaw (2019) focused a qualitative study on the students' attitudes, but the goal was to explore what students identified as "best practices" for feedback,

such as timeliness, detail, engagement, and delivery method. However, they were not asked to report how or why those practices had an impact.

What Still Needs to be Explored

Knowing what feedback methods work best for specific populations has value, but this line of research leaves noticeable gaps. It doesn't address the problems of feedback as they relate to other populations. Additionally, having knowledge of what works without understanding the underlying causes or reasons for the methods' successes, instructors are in danger of oversimplifying the process or inappropriately employing methods.

Although some research has been done to examine attitudes, these researchers, on the whole, did not explore the underlying causes of those attitudes. As instructors move to incorporate this research into their practice, the end result, despite good intentions and hefty investments of time, might be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst, equivalent to treating the symptoms but not the disease, to use an unfortunately negative simile. This dissertation is intended to discover those underlying causes that create obstacles for academic success and determine ways to resolve potential problems. The concepts of Discourse and Mental Modeling were examined as potential factors that could speak to those obstacles.

Research on the Role of Discourse – Language as a Sociocultural Practice

Instructor feedback, whether it be spoken or written, consists predominantly of words, phrases, or sentences intended to impart information that the instructor believes a student needs to know. Although the instructor and student may be using the same language to communicate, one could argue that is a superficial understanding. Language can be examined from a

sociocultural perspective, which argues that an individual's culture shapes the individual's understanding and practices of language.

Discourse has been defined as an understanding of language that goes beyond isolated words or sentences and is intrinsically personal, both on an individual level and in relation to specialized groups or fields (Chafe, 1994; Hassen, 2015). Gee (2013) defined Discourse as the "being-doing" (p. 143) of a particular community, which includes the language, the manner of exchanging ideas, behaviors, feelings, and values shared by that particular group when they are functioning as a group. The shared Discourse of the group provides the means for preserving the individuals' identities as members of that community. The being-doing elements are the products of the culture itself, and while those elements might not be exclusive to a single community, they can be in some way unique to that community. Therefore, Discourse is understood to shape and be shaped by the culture or community itself. Important elements of the Discourse of a community are the language and language practices of the group, and, consequently, the community's literacy practices and values. "Language is not some abstract propositional representation.... Rather, meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world" (Gee, 2013, p. 137). Examining how students interact as members of the Discourse community, through their understanding of instructor feedback, was a focus of this study.

As Mercer (2004) stated, "Communicative events are shaped by cultural and historical factors and thinking, learning and development cannot be understood without taking account of the intrinsically social and communicative nature of human life" (p. 139). More so, this perspective maintains that an individual's intellectual development is intricately connected to historical, social, and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Because the purpose of this

study was to explore students' perceptions of feedback, with an emphasis on individual response, using a sociocultural lens may lead to a better understanding of how and why the individual interprets and responds to a text, or more specifically, feedback. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) argued, "feedback has no effect in a vacuum" (p. 82); in other words, context or culture matters.

Academic Discourse and the Role of Academic Writing/Reading

As noted earlier, feedback is a commonly used and highly valued tool of college instructors. Feedback is the product of an individual instructor, but additionally it has roots in the Discourse community to which instructor belongs. In higher education, individuals must understand the manner in which the academic Discourse community members communicate; they must know and internalize the rules that shape and define academic literacy (Schleppegrell, 2004; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012), as well as the beliefs, practices, and values that define that community. Not only a matter of language, academic Discourse values "habits of mind" (Thonney, 2011). Ryan (2011) and Moje et al. (2004) argued that students and teachers need to establish a shared language.

In practice, however, when students are placed into the college classroom, often they have a limited understanding of the Discourse of the academic community (Nist & Holschuh, 2005), and the rules that shape and define that academic community usually are not explicitly taught in the college classroom (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). Yet, despite this disjuncture caused by a lack of or incomplete understanding, those students are expected to participate in that academic Discourse, including their comprehension and response to the feedback their instructors have provided. Certainly, unfamiliarity with the Discourse will create potential confusion in the case of deciphering and responding to feedback. Hutchings (2014) found that

the impact could be worse than confusion – his participants reported academic practices to be alienating.

A commonly used strategy to introduce students to their new community is to assign writing tasks in college courses. Though their purpose may seem predominantly for assessment of course content knowledge, the assignments provide opportunities for students to develop the habits of mind and of practice to enable them to participate in academic discourse, learning how to think and to learn, essential to their success in college (Caron, 2008). Through practice in academic writing, students are given instruction not only in the conventions of academic writing, but also the rhetorical strategies, as writers and readers, that will be required of them as they progress through their academic careers (Thonney, 2011). The belief is that these assignments will illustrate the interaction between writing, thinking, problem solving, while highlighting the role of audience, purpose, and writer's ethos as well as the conventions of and values attached to writing in their disciplinary community (Keil, 1998).

However, Van de Poel & Gasiorek (2012) argued that attaining academic literacy is a “socialization process . . . with academic literacy referring to the competence and range of skills students need not only to read and write texts, but also to understand, interact, and communicate with members of their academic community” (p. 296). The process develops over time, through repeated interaction, and with practice in various, non-restrictive, non-repressive genres with an awareness of diverse discourses (Gunter, 2011). As Wardle (2009) explained, college writing should not be understood as *knowing how to write* in academia, but instead *knowing about writing* in academia. The difference can be likened to providing a template that outlines what to do, as in *They Say/I Say* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014), a short text that shares examples and fill-in-the-blank templates for student writers to follow, versus instructing student writers to be

cognizant of their rhetorical situation and developing a text appropriate to that situation.

In a study that examined the relationship between academic Discourse communities and feedback, Sommers (2006) claimed, on the basis of her four-year longitudinal study, that feedback was the single most important factor that contributed to the students' sense of belonging in the academic setting. Conversely, she acknowledged that feedback also could be the major source of alienation; if students do not understand the language or the values, they are excluded from conversation and participation. This relates to a qualitative study by Sutton and Gill (2010), who argued that students had difficulty engaging with feedback due to the complexity of feedback created it being socially situated and impacted by the power relations involved in the student/teacher interaction.

Another study, conducted by Orsmond et al. (2005), examined the role that feedback can play to improve students' understanding of their environment so they can participate more actively in their learning. Recognizing the complexity of reading and responding to feedback, the researchers concluded that students do not understand the "multiple dimensions" (p. 381) of feedback. Their recommendation was that students be directed through discussions, emphasizing the participative nature of feedback and learning, acknowledging the communal aspects of learning. Riddell (2015) found that first-year students' work improved most significantly with frequent feedback along with scaffolding.

Luhach (2020) conducted a quantitative study that studied the role of feedback in increasing students' participation in an academic Discourse community. He found that the typical classroom was described as a passive learning environment, which did not encourage students to develop the critical skills they would need to be successful in their classes. However, feedback enhanced the students' knowledge of writing genres, subject matter, and the rhetorical

elements pertinent to the field. These findings are very similar to those of Woodward-Kron (2002), who examined how feedback worked to socialize students into using practices of the discipline, arguing that educators in higher education should adapt the concept of Discourse communities to help students be successful.

Another study that explored how feedback positively impacted students' ability to navigate more competently in the Discourse community focused on second-year university students (Schillings et al., 2020). The mixed methods study concluded that instructors' high-quality written feedback is critical, conversations about the feedback increased the students' understanding of the assessment and ways to act upon it.

What Still Needs to be Explored

Some earlier studies have supported the use of feedback as a tool to provide insights into how to participate in the academic discourse (Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Hyatt, 2005); however, other than the study of Sommers (2006), studies have not explored the dual nature of feedback as a potential source of both alienation and inclusion. More significantly for this study, there has been little research on students' awareness of academic Discourse. If a student does not take advantage of instructor feedback, could it be because the student doesn't understand the rules or expectations of different academic Discourse communities? Do the students understand that their ability to participate in that Discourse will impact their performance (and assessment) in their classes? Do students see feedback as a means by which they can become members of the Discourse community? This study attempted to discover more about students' own awareness of the interplay between feedback and Discourse.

Mental Modeling and the Role of Feedback

Because feedback consists of language, and language is shaped by the Discourse community using it, knowing how students understand and adapt to their new Discourse communities is relevant to this study. The concept of mental modeling may help make this abstract process more concrete. McNamara et al. (1991) define the concept of a mental model as the individual's unique internal representation created to illustrate, explain, or work through one's thought processes in order to make good decisions. Mental modeling involves metacognition, a highly personal and individualized process involving "thinking about and questioning [one's] unique way of knowing" (Commander & Smith, 1996), a means to unpack prior knowledge and experiences to make new connections (Babcock, 2007). Flavell (1979) argued that metacognition is a necessary component to monitor and regulate cognition and learning, emphasizing the element of growth or change that is closely linked with mental modeling.

The academic environment in which students are placed requires students to navigate not only different disciplines but also the unique cultures of individual classrooms. Students who use feedback to change their mental models, recognizing that change is needed to adapt successfully to new situations, are better equipped to determine what rules, values, and language choices are most appropriate in a given situation. Their ability to analyze available options and personal motives enables them to participate more fully in the Discourse community (Laskey & Hetzel, 2010). Students who use mental modeling to effect positive change must have a high level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993), the belief that the self has the ability or power to accomplish the task at hand. They also must be self-regulated learners: they must recognize their responsibility

and ability to monitor and adapt to the learning situations with which they are faced (Graham & Harris, 2000).

Studies Related to Mental Modeling and Feedback

Responding to feedback can be complicated by mismatched understanding of the purpose of feedback, the language used, and the complex, dynamic process of giving and receiving feedback, as well as affective factors that make the process more complicated. Examining how students work through the process on their own could provide important insights to the complexity of the phenomena.

Sadler (1983) argued that the instructor feedback takes the responsibility away from the student and that it inhibits a student's ability to process information to make changes. He claimed that educators must instruct students to take ownership of improving the quality of their work rather than rely on comments from their instructors. He believed that instructors needed "to shift the focus away from telling the students about the quality of their work...towards having them see and understand the reasons for quality" (p. 546), both in the process of drafting the text and in its completed form. A strong proponent of the peer review process, Sadler believed the responsibility of assessment belonged to the students themselves, both as individuals and as members of the community of the classroom. Rather than assist students in understanding and adapting their mental models to their new environment, Sadler believed feedback got in the way of the mental modeling process.

This argument was also made by Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick (2006). Their study showed that while students are urged to take responsibility for their own learning in higher education, assessment continues to lie in the domain of the instructor, creating a transmission view of the

process and giving students an excuse not to take an active part in evaluation of their own work, to the detriment of the students in class and in life. Hounsell (2008) also supported this argument; he asserted that feedback, though intended to be a tool for student growth, actually could negatively impact that growth by eliminating the need for students to evaluate their work on their own. He believes that unless students are able to reason out for themselves what constitutes quality writing in a particular situation or context, they will fail to be successful in academia.

Kellogg et al. (2010) did not take so strong a stand against feedback, citing that feedback is a valuable tool, but they found that allowing students time to revise texts without instructors' comments appeared to be equally effective for students in terms of the quality of their revisions. They did not support eliminating instructor feedback, but they recognized that feedback can be a crutch for some students. This reinforces an earlier study by Vardi (2009), who concluded that while feedback contributed to critical engagement and increased students' ability to be self-directed, students seemed to prefer receiving prescriptive feedback. Not surprisingly, some students may prefer to take the easy way out and be told what to do rather than figuring it out for themselves. DeMello (2017) examined undergraduate students in a multiple case study and determined that students lacked the metacognitive skills that are required for self-regulation and change to take place.

However, a number of studies support that feedback does help students develop better metacognitive practices. A quantitative study that spanned five semesters and focused on students enrolled in the same upper-level course (Callender et al., 2016) found that feedback significantly improved both the participants' judgments and performance. A more recent study showed a strong connection between feedback and improved metacognition (Cogliano et al.,

2021), including increased accuracy of monitoring judgments, independent self-testing, and academic performance. Another study that supported the positive effects of feedback to change students' mental models focused on undergraduate STEM students (Limeri et al., 2020). The researchers argued that due to the findings of their study, researchers and practitioners needed to provide more interventions to promote student success. This suggestion highlights a problem noted in a much earlier study; Schraw (1998) found that students were not able to develop robust metacognitive strategies and practices on their own; the practices developed with the instruction by their professors. Zinchuk (2017), working with incoming university students, found that metacognition had to be taught, and instructors needed to explicitly show the connections to generally accepted practices in the university.

Overall, the studies that have examined the role of feedback and the role it plays in students' ability to impact their mental modeling process argue that feedback can be a stumbling block for students to move ahead as self-regulated learners. However, this in part may be due to the nature of the feedback itself; knowing if the feedback in the studies was summative or formative may well have an impact on students' responses. If the instructors or the students saw feedback as summative, the students would have little reason to change their mental processing.

What Still Needs to be Explored

Though much research has been done on the impact of feedback on students' academic performance, studies that examine the underlying reasons for the change or lack of have not been a prominent part of the literature. Related to that, little research has been done that explores the students' understanding of the role or purpose of feedback and if and how students actually mentally process the feedback given to them. To gain a better understanding of those reasons and

processes, this study examined how first year students described the mental processing that took place as they processed and responded to instructor feedback on assignments from earlier in the semester as well as how the feedback impacted their decisions on later assignments in the course and, potentially, other assignments in other classes.

Summary

Although instructor feedback has long been a focus of research studies, the review of the research highlights that most literature examines feedback's immediate, short-term outcomes rather than exploring why students respond to the feedback given. This study moved beyond exploring what feedback methods work best for what populations; instead, it was a conceptualization study, intended to determine the underlying reasons for the effectiveness of feedback in its various forms. Because interpretation of feedback is impacted by context and is subject to sociocultural influences, this study examined first-year college students' awareness and appreciation of the Discourse communities into which they were transitioning and how feedback impacted their mental modeling. Intricately related to this transition process, this study explored how students conceptualize that transition and what factors influence their changing mental models. Recognizing that these interconnected factors might assist or hinder students when feedback is given, I looked at, as students shared their experiences, how and why context affected the way they responded to and acted upon written feedback as well as the processes they believe took place in the sending, receiving, and implementation of feedback.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine how college students enrolled in first-year composition courses conceptualize the role and value of their instructors' written feedback. This study provided insights into students' beliefs about feedback and if and how those beliefs can be seen as a means to participate more fully and be more successful in an academic community.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do students in first-year composition courses conceptualize the written feedback they receive from their composition course instructors?
 - a. In what ways do the students describe the role of composition course instructors' feedback they receive on written assignments?
 - b. How do those students describe the value they place on composition course instructors' feedback given to them on their writing assignments?
 - c. How do those students explain the reasoning or thought processes they employ when reading and using composition course instructors' feedback?
2. In what ways do those same students describe how they have used, or will use, composition course instructors' feedback given to them to improve future writing assignments?

This chapter will provide an overview of the methodology that was used: research design and rationale, participants, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, and researcher role.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

As stated previously in Chapter 2, much of the published literature on feedback has predominately focused on quantitative measures of effectiveness or categories of feedback, looking to measure or quantify student success or improved performance in terms of content knowledge (e.g., du Toit, 2012; Negretti, 2012; Randall & Zundel, 2012; Stewart et al., 2010). This may help the reader understand or measure what feedback methods work well with certain populations, but the research does not explore the underlying reasons why those methods are effective. Less research has been done that explores the students' perceptions of how and why they might use feedback to make changes on future assignments (Calhoon-Dillhunt & Forrest, 2013).

In contrast to the quantitative studies that have been done, a qualitative research design provides a different perspective to explore and understand the phenomena of reading feedback. Because the purpose of this study was to examine students' personal conceptualizations of feedback, qualitative research allowed me to gather information to attain an understanding of those subjective perceptions, all of which are influenced by the individuals' context and personal epistemologies (Mertens, 2010). The participants' understanding can best be learned by allowing those participants the opportunity to explore their experiences and to reflect on the meaning of those experiences through qualitative data collection strategies (Seidman, 2013; Spradley, 1979).

Design

The design for this project was a case study. I approached with an understanding of case a defined by Stake (1995), in that the subject(s) could be one or many, but must have “the specificity, the boundedness to be called a case” (p. 2); the case for my study was bounded by restricting participants to those students who were enrolled in the Composition II courses offered at a single college. Selecting a particular group of people in a particular place may seem contrived or artificial (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), but that group can be seen as a “piece of the world” (p. 60) that is a natural part or unit of that larger world.

Another characteristic linked to Stake’s (1995) definition of case study is that it be “holistic” (p. xi), meaning that the study takes into account how context might impact the phenomena taking place. Using a case study approach, I was able to examine students’ perceptions “in depth, in detail, in context, and holistically” (Patton, 1987, p. 19) through the interviews conducted. Context was a key consideration, in that college composition courses offer unique opportunities to explore the relationship of students and feedback since written feedback on students’ drafts typically is provided regularly and accessed easily.

A third characteristic identified by Stake (1995) is that a case study places an emphasis on interpretation; it “records objectively” (p. 8) while at the same time attempting to find meaning in the information being shared by the subject. It also allows for “redefining” and “redirecting” (p. 9) the research questions as the researcher examines and interprets the data as it is collected. Though I did not change my research questions during this study, I adapted my interview guide questions as the study progressed as I came to see patterns and issues I had not initially considered.

Case study also relies on the use of multiple sources and data collection methods to provide a rich, intensive, holistic description and analysis (Mertens, 2010), which in this study took the form of student surveys and interviews with think alouds, instructors' syllabi and comments on graded drafts, and additional artifacts found of the college's website.

Setting

Awareness of the setting and context is an important element when conducting a case study (Stake, 2005). I selected a small private liberal arts and sciences college located near a large city in the Midwest as the focus of my study because the institution and the students were accessible to me and were able to participate in a timely manner, allowing for purposeful sampling (Mertens, 2010). To get a clearer sense of the environment in which the participants were functioning, I looked to the college website for information about the school's practices and mission, the student population, and school philosophy.

The college website stated that the ratio of instructors to students was 1:14, which allowed the school to offer small classes and instructors to provide individual attention. The college's mission was to be "a diverse and caring community of learners" whose core values were "intellectual excellence, community, social responsibility, stewardship, and faith, meaning and values."

Diversity of Student Population and Surrounding Area

Looking further on the website, I found a breakdown of the actual diversity of the campus as illustrated by the demographics of the college population. Of the approximately 3,000 students who attended the college, the age range of 70% of the student population was between 18 and

22, traditional college age. A majority of students were women (58.8%); 64% were White, 18.6% were Hispanic/Latino, 5.58% Asian, 5.5% African American, and the remainder fell into categories of two or more races, ethnicity unknown, non-resident, American Indian or Alaska Native, or other. These numbers are reflected in the faculty demographics as well, with the majority of faculty being female and/or White. This information is provided to highlight that the institution is not reflective of larger, more diverse, but perhaps less personal institutions.

To get a sense of how the college fit in the larger demographics of the surrounding area, I learned that although the city in which the college is located is predominantly White (81.31%), the metropolitan area that is 20 minutes away shows greater diversity: 31.4% are White, 29.9% are Latino, 28.7% are Black, and 6.9% are Asian.

Shared Academic Environment

The college has a first-year writing sequence that consists of two semesters of introductory composition courses. The college website states that the courses are “designed to develop college-level writing and reading skills,” signaling an awareness that both writing and reading play roles in developing academic literacy and consequently academic success.

The two-semester sequence, as described on the college website, focuses on “the writing process as a means of discovering ideas, to see revision as a necessary and recursive part of the writing process, to see good writing as dependent on context, and to create relationships between reading and writing.” All the students participating in the study had taken Composition I and had at least one previous semester of experience in the college classroom with college writing; therefore, all the participants had an established knowledge of and relationship with instructor

feedback, not just from the Composition II class they were taking at the time of the study, but from previous classes as well.

These factors illustrate that the students enrolled in Composition II shared a common experience, the “boundedness” referred to by Stake (1995, p. 2), regardless of who their instructor was during the semester of the study.

Recruitment of Participants

To maximize the specificity, detail, and depth of responses (Patton, 1987, p. 19) to questions about feedback, I wanted to work with individuals who had easy access to written assignments with instructor feedback. Because the students enrolled in the Composition II course were required to submit multiple drafts for review for each essay, that population could provide me with the data needed. Additionally, all students were required to take first-year composition courses, so the potential pool of recruits was representative of the general population. This population allowed me to use purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Participants were recruited from all sections of College Composition II through classroom visits and fliers (Appendix A) that were posted on campus (bulletin boards and display areas) and sent to their student email accounts. To encourage participation, a small incentive was offered: those who participated could (and did) submit their names for a drawing for a \$10 gift card for survey participation or \$25 gift card for interview participation from the campus bookstore.

Students could access the survey (Appendix B) in several ways. The fliers distributed in class and posted around campus provided a web address link to the survey in addition to a designated QR-code; I also emailed students in sections of Composition II that I had not visited

in order to share the fliers with those students, and I provided follow-up emails to those students who had signed consent forms in class visits for easier electronic access since the links on the flier were active. The survey was accessible to all students, since they had access to computers available on campus in the school library, the tutoring center, and several open computer labs.

The 31 students who agreed to participate were asked to complete a consent form before completing the survey. A paper consent form (Appendix C) was provided during class visits. For those who did not volunteer during a class visit, an electronic consent form (Appendix D) was embedded in the survey itself. The form explained that the confidentiality of participants would be protected and that anyone who chose not to participate could opt out without penalty.

Data Collection

Several data collection strategies were employed for this case study. To gather data from the student participants, I used online surveys and retrospective think aloud interviews (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). The think aloud activities centered on student-selected written assignments with instructor feedback; these drafts were assignments from the first month of the semester that would could be used to develop later semester drafts. Additional documents, specifically, assignment prompts and course syllabi, were employed to provide additional context to better understand the documents being examined. I also gathered information from electronic documents that contributed to developing a fuller picture of the “background of the situation” (Mertens, 2010, p. 373). This included information from the college website to identify the goals and mission of the institution as a whole and what, if any, role First-Year Composition courses played in meeting that mission. I examined the department website to learn what goals or purposes of the First-Year Composition courses were emphasized to determine if there was a

sense of a Discourse community within the department itself. Table 1 identifies how the data collection strategies were used to answer my research questions.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Strategies

Research Questions	Surveys	Interviews and Think Alouds	Additional Documents
1. How do students in first-year composition courses conceptualize the written feedback they receive from their composition course instructors?	X	X	
a. In what ways do those students describe the role of composition course instructors' feedback they receive on written assignments?	X	X	X
b. How do those students describe the value they place on composition course instructors' feedback given to them on their writing assignments?	X	X	X
c. How do those students explain the reasoning or thought processes they employ when reading and using composition course instructors' feedback?		X	
2. In what ways do those same students describe how they have used, or will use, composition course instructors' feedback given to them to improve future writing assignments?	X	X	X

The use of multiple strategies assisted in establishing and maintaining the integrity of the study (Vockell & Asher, 1998) through triangulation of the data (Mertens, 2010). By looking at the survey data together with the interview and think aloud transcripts, I was able to confirm responses, spot discrepancies, and pose follow-up questions to determine with more clarity the students' thoughts and perceptions.

Before data was collected, I filed a request for changes to my previously approved IRB proposal submitted to my home institution for my pilot study. That study had been conducted at a different college and had a smaller number of participants. I also was required to submit my proposal to the IRB at my research site.

Online Survey

The online survey was used for timely “collection of a data from a large[r] number of people” (Mertens, 2010, p. 173). During the first three weeks of the semester, I reached out to Composition II instructors, at an in-service meeting and through emails, explaining my study and requesting an invitation to visit their class sections to recruit participants for my study. Then, after the fourth week of the term, Composition II students were recruited, through fliers, face-to-face classroom visits, and outreach emails, to participate in the first stage of my study by completing an online Qualtrics survey that most students could complete in five minutes or less. An earlier form of the survey had been piloted in the previous study mentioned earlier; the revised survey was shortened and included only two text response questions, making the survey more concise and focused.

Some participants volunteered during the classroom visits and signed consent forms immediately; they were given the link to the survey both as a QR-code and a weblink. A majority of the participants, however, were recruited through emailed fliers that I sent out to all the students enrolled in the Composition II sections I did not visit. When students responded to my email agreeing to participate, I emailed them the link to the survey.

The survey was distributed to the participants online for several reasons: online surveys have the advantage of convenience of distribution, prompt responses, automated data collection

and tabulation, at a low cost (Converse et al., 2008), with no notable differences in response to traditional paper or mail surveys (Denton & Strader, 2000). By allowing the students to access the survey online, I was able to reach and collect data from more students than I could if I had to rely on distribution on paper. Students were able to access the survey in two ways: one, through a link provided in an email sent to them through their campus email, a method of communication that all students are instructed to check regularly since it is one of the main methods of the distribution for college announcements and individual course materials and information, and two, through a QR-code (in addition to the hyperlink) that was provided on the fliers distributed and posted. Students who did not have internet and computer access of their own were encouraged to access the survey using computers on campus, eliminating a potential barrier for students who did not have the required technology in their residences. The online survey included an online consent form and provided an explanation to introduce participants to the purpose and scope of the survey.

The survey itself was an online descriptive survey (Mertens, 2010, p. 177) consisting of 11 questions gathered information on the students' general behaviors and attitudes towards the use of feedback. All the questions (except for the self-identifier for the drawing) had required answers, so that I would have more information for my analysis.

The survey began by explaining the concept of similes, or figurative comparisons. The participants were provided with two examples of similes and then were prompted to create a simile in one of two forms ("Feedback is like" or "Getting feedback feels like") that described the individual's attitude or understanding of feedback. I chose to start with this because similes, which are simple, short metaphors, can provide a "shared access" (Tobin, 1989, p. 446) to attitudes and feelings through the interpretation of shared experiences. Although creating similes

might have been an unfamiliar process to some students, the concept of “getting feedback feels like” was relatable to most students, since they at some point have gone through the process of getting feedback. The value of this exercise was that these figurative comparisons provided more concrete pictures of the students’ conceptualizations. By analyzing the language and images the students employed to describe their thoughts and attitudes, I was able to uncover the participants’ underlying attitudes (positive, neutral, or negative) toward or beliefs about instructor feedback that I would not have been able to discern as clearly or concretely from the other questions that required the participants to provide generalized answers focusing on frequency of behaviors or beliefs. Examining these similes provided insights into the rationale or reasoning for the participants’ behaviors and attitudes toward feedback.

The remainder of the survey consisted of nine Likert-type scale questions and one open-ended question. The first eight questions asked the participants to rank the frequency, ranging from “almost always” to “very seldom,” of situations that describe their experiences with instructor feedback: do they receive feedback (#2), do instructors talk about feedback (#3), do they read it and understand it (#4 and #6), do they talk with their instructors about feedback provided (#7), is feedback helpful (#8), does feedback impact what they do on future drafts (#9), and do they receive enough feedback (#10). Question #5 asked about accessibility of feedback on electronically-graded assignments to determine how access or lack of it was a major challenge for the participants. The last question (Q #11) was open-ended, asking students to list what they believed to be the purposes of feedback. The participants’ answers helped me understand how the participants viewed feedback and what they believed they were or were not doing with feedback. These answers provided insights into why the students approached feedback in the manner that they did. This information was used to identify what the participants claimed they

were doing when they received feedback, specifically addressing my research questions (see Table 1).

The answers to these questions guided my selection of interview participants. My intent was to select a range of students who provided a maximum variation (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 1987) in their attitudes toward and practices related to instructor feedback, on a spectrum that showed a range of high to low frequency (“almost always” to “very seldom”) and positive and negative attitudes toward feedback. Characteristics on the positive end of the spectrum included a higher frequency of use. By selecting students who represent the full range of responses, I acquired information that provided a fair picture of prominent themes and collected data that was representative of the larger population of students.

Interviews

Personal interviews were an integral component of my research because they provided insights into the “internal events of thoughts and feelings” (Weiss, 1994, p. 2) of the participants, which was the focus of this study. In-depth interviews provided the opportunity for the participants to share their experiences, to reflect on those experiences, and in the process, to come to a better understanding of the meaning and the significance of the experiences and their underlying issues (Seidman, 2013).

After analyzing the data from the 31 surveys, I identified 15 students who represented a range of responses about their attitudes and uses of feedback on the frequency spectrum (Almost Always/Often/Sometimes/Very Seldom) as well as a range of attitudes along the positive to negative spectrum. I also identified a pool of additional potential interviewees as back-up participants in case my initially selected group choose not to participate. I invited the initial

group of students, through their student email accounts, to participate in interviews and to contact me via my school email to set up an interview schedule. As some students chose not to participate, I reached out to my pool of back-up participants in the same manner. To those students who did not reply, I sent additional email requests in order to meet my anticipated quota of 15 interviews. The final group of interview participants represented the range of seven positive, two neutral, and six negative.

Fifteen interview participants were chosen to provide a maximum-variation sampling (Mertens, 2010, p. 321) to gather a broader understanding of students' perceptions of feedback. This sampling provided the greatest range of variation represented in the group as a whole as well as highlighted both the unique aspects and the commonalities of those interviewed (Mertens, 2010). After 15 interviews, it was clear that sufficiency (Seidman, 2013), enough participants who "reflect the range . . . of the population" (p. 58) being studied, and saturation (Seidman, 2013), when the information provided by the participants became redundant, were both met.

If the interview participants had not signed a paper consent form for the interview earlier in the process, during the classroom visit, they were required to do so before the interviews took place. Participants were asked to bring along written assignments, with the course instructors' names removed, that included course instructor feedback; these documents were used as tools to stimulate the participants' reflections on feedback, but also as the means for me to understand the students' thought processes, using retrospective think alouds (Davey, 1983). The documents also provided concrete examples (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of the relationship between the kinds of feedback the participants received and their responses to that feedback.

Semi-structured interviews, approximately 45 to 60 minutes long, were conducted throughout the remainder of the semester. A research guide, consisting of 16 questions (Appendix E), that had been piloted and revised for clarity and relevance, was used to help maintain focus of the interview, but the process remained open enough to allow for the discussion to move away from the guide, should the situation so warrant it (Weiss, 1994). The guide was reviewed, as recommended by Merton (2010), by a colleague for clarity of language and relevance to the study.

The interview consisted of two components. First, participants were asked to provide background information on their college education experience, their typical assignments, and how much feedback they usually are given by their instructors. This information helped me understand the context in which the students were functioning so that I could construct a fuller meaning of their responses. Additionally, for purposes of activating prior knowledge and to gather information about the students' conceptualizations, the students were asked to reflect on their beliefs about feedback, its purpose, impact, and value.

As preparation for the interviews, I reviewed the participants' survey responses and had them on hand at the interview. This provided me a way to triangulate the information the students shared: it allowed me to ask questions to confirm or clarify their earlier professed attitudes and practices involving feedback and understand more clearly the complexity of their attitudes.

Following these overview questions, the participants were asked to provide retrospective think alouds (Davey, 1983) that required the students to verbalize the process and rationale they used in the past when reading and responding to feedback given to them by their course instructors. Having been directed to bring physical copies of written assignments (of their

choice) that contained written instructors' feedback, students used the assignments to show the physical processes they used in the process of reading feedback: the order in which they read feedback (an indication of their priorities, feedback versus grades) and how much time and attention they gave to the comments as they read through them. The think alouds also required them to articulate the thought processes they experienced—or experienced at the time of the interview—and their emotional responses, as indicated by their comments and body language, as they examined the feedback, or lack of it, on their assignments. The copies of the assignments that students brought to the interview were valuable tools to elicit responses to and reflections on the processes that take place as students read and respond to specific feedback. By examining the drafts with the students during the interviews, watching and listening to the students as they processed the feedback, I was provided with context that assisted in understanding the participants' actual experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and the “background of the situation” (Mertens, 2010, p. 373) of those experiences. Students shared not only their perceptions of what they did, but also how and why they made the choices they did. This information was examined in conjunction with their responses on the survey to triangulate all the data to achieve a clearer picture of their processes and attitudes. In instances where their earlier comments contradicted what they expressed earlier in the interview, I was able to examine in more detail, through additional questions about the contradictions, what they believed their practices and attitudes actually were.

Thirteen of the fifteen interviews took place on the campus of the college in a private office, allowing for privacy without sacrificing the safety of being in a public place. Two of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to scheduling conflicts. Though a summary of the phone interviews was provided only through my handwritten notes, the face-to-face interviews

were recorded with a digital audio recorder. Those recordings were transferred to a password-protected laptop computer, after which they were deleted from the digital recorder. Shortly after each interview took place, the audio files were transcribed before subtle elements of the interviews were forgotten. When typing the transcriptions, I maintained the language of the participant, and I included speech patterns and provided descriptive characteristics (e.g., to indicate laughter, pauses). Several copies of the transcripts were used for coding, and one clean (unmarked) copy was maintained for reference. The copies of the transcripts were kept in a file in a locked office.

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, real names were not used when the data was collected and transcribed. Instead, pseudonyms that accurately reflected the characteristics of the interviewees, such as ethnicity, gender, and age, were used (Seidman, 2013). Table 2 provides participant demographics.

Documents

Printed or electronic materials provide a record of an institution's activities, values and expectations, giving insights that may not be apparent through other sources of information (Patten, 1987). Feedback is created and responded to in specific contexts. In order to have a deeper understanding of the contexts in which the participants of this study were situated, e.g., philosophy of the writing program and the individual classrooms, I gathered documents from the English department and the participants themselves. Those documents included course syllabi, course assignment prompts, students' previous assignments, and policy statements. These documents provided a better understanding of pertinent characteristics of the academic Discourse communities in which students were trying to participate. I was able to explore if and how

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Class year	Major	Role of Writing in Other Classes
Alicia	First	Communication Science & Disorders	Informal, low stakes graded writing assignments
Allen	First	Kinesiology	Not much writing
Annie	First	Art	Big part in all her classes, even art
Bonnie	First	Business	Not much writing
Courtney	First	Education	Many essays
Elaine	First, returning	Business Management	Writing is “essential” in all her classes
Fahim	Second	Philosophy	Most of his assignments are papers
Imamu	First	French	An important component in all his classes
Judy	First	Undeclared	Some writing required
Karen	First	Undeclared	Not much writing
Lexi	First	Undeclared	Much writing, not rigorously graded
Maria	First	Political Science	Not much writing
Molly	First	Computer Science	Not much writing
Noor	Second	Biology	Mostly research writing
Ted	First	Kinesiology	Required to do “a lot” of writing

context, as defined by the documents, correlated to what students said they believed and did so that I could better understand the students' rationale.

Data Analysis

I began my study by examining institution's website material and course documents to get a clearer picture of the culture in which my participants functioned. Data analysis that addressed my research questions began with analysis of survey data, which took place as the surveys were submitted and continued as additional surveys were completed (5.5 weeks). While surveys were submitted, interview participants were identified to include a maximum range of responses, and interviews were scheduled and conducted. For four weeks, analysis of the survey and interview data, including the documents students provided for the think aloud section of the interview, took place simultaneously; interview data analysis continued until all the interviews were completed.

Document Analysis

In order to understand the context of my case study, initially I examined individual course syllabi. Specifically, I looked at individual instructors' comments about feedback as well as office hours and conferencing (as opportunities to discuss feedback) to get a better sense of the role and importance of instructors placed on feedback by explicitly talking about feedback with their students. Examining the English department's website, I looked at how feedback and the recursive elements of the writing process were discussed in the department's curriculum to get a general sense of the context in which the students were functioning. As reflected in their course syllabi, a majority of the instructors in the first-year writing program supported

student/teacher conferencing. The course syllabi I examined from the 20 sections of COMP II offered that term, 13 mentioned opportunities for students to meet with their instructors to discuss their essays. Three syllabi scheduled two or more mandatory conferences into class time, eight syllabi made references to optional conferencing at the students' request, and two used language that was less formal and more encouraging: "Talk with me: I'm here to help" and "I look forward to meeting with you to discuss your work in this class." Overall, instructors invited students to conference with them, but for the most part students were required to take the initiative.

Survey Analysis

Data analysis of the surveys began once the participants started submitting completed online surveys and continued until the survey collection period ended, approximately for 5.5 weeks. The responses were recorded, tabulated, and graphed automatically by Qualtrics, the online survey program provider. Qualtrics generated reports of percentages for responses to the Likert scale questions (#2-10). The cumulative percentages, as tabulated by Qualtrics, provided evidence of patterns of thought and behavior in the total population studied. Qualtrics also allowed me to download a list of the similes that the participants created (Question #1) as well as a list of the purposes of feedback identified by the participants (Question #11). In order to move into the second stage of data collection, quick and careful analysis of the information on individual surveys began shortly after the surveys were submitted. Later, this information on individual surveys was reviewed and triangulated with interview responses to determine the reliability of the responses the participants provided in their interviews.

Examining each survey participant's responses, I looked at the responses to the Likert scale questions to determine where they lay on a positive-neutral-negative spectrum (Table 3). Those responses that indicated that getting feedback was a good and productive experience and that students frequently read and used the feedback ("Almost always" or "Often") were placed on the positive end of the spectrum. Higher frequency would suggest a higher level of engagement with the feedback process, and negative responses were those that indicated infrequency (very seldom"). Responses that described getting feedback as unpleasant or not useful and that the students were less likely to engage with it ("Very seldom") were also placed on the negative end of the spectrum. Responses in the middle, neutral area of the spectrum expressed indifference or uncertainty ("Sometimes"). An "almost always" and "often" response to the questions were interpreted as a positive attitude to feedback, since the student indicated that feedback had value; "sometimes" was neutral, and "very seldom" was interpreted as indifference.

Table 3

Questions that Demonstrate Students' Attitudes and Practices Towards Feedback

	Question
Q. 4	I carefully read the feedback given to me.
Q. 6	I understand the feedback given to me.
Q. 8	The feedback given to me is helpful.
Q. 9	I consult the feedback from a previous paper before or as I write my next paper.
Q. 10	Generally speaking, I wish my instructors gave me more feedback.

Additionally, I looked at the similes that the students created, using discourse analysis to attempt to get to the underlying meanings of the language used in their responses (Gee &

Handford, 2012). Table 4 shows examples of the analysis of similes. As stated by Boréus and Bergström (2017), “language is not ...a neutral instrument for communication” (p. 210), but instead a tool that can emphasize different “perspectives of the world (p. 210). I analyzed the participants’ language, looking for patterns. using open coding, to uncover their thoughts about feedback and placed their responses on a spectrum that ranged from positive/edifying/constructive to negative/unpleasant/useless.

Table 4

Examples of Analysis of Similes

Type	Describes	Example
Positive	growth, opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “like getting a gift” • “like finding a map while walking in a forest – you’ll never be able to find your way out otherwise” • “like bricks - used to help support and build something”
Neutral	uncertainty, resignation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “like going to the doctor. It either confirms or denies what you were thinking” • “like scratching the bottom of your foot on the floor – it is difficult, but it is possible” • “like a wild dog – you never know if it will be good or bad”
Negative	unease, punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “like getting a shot, no one wants one” • “following the rules when you’re a little kid – if you disobey the rules, you get a punishment” • “like going to the doctor”

Responses to Question 11, which asked the participants to list the purposes of feedback, were categorized as positive if the purposes were formative, constructive, or purposeful in

nature; if the purposes were punitive or unproductive, they were classified as negative (Table 5).

Those responses that described feedback was merely summative were placed in the neutral category.

Table 5

Participants' Responses to Question on Purpose of Feedback

Type	Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “to help you do better” (x 7) • “to improve your work” (x 9) • “to provide advice, hints, or guidance” • “motivates me to think outside of the box” • “feedback is important to grow as a student” (x 3) • “a solid list to refer to when doing the next assignment” (x 2)
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “to make the writer aware of their areas of weakness” • “let me know what mistakes I made” • “to confirm or deny a student’s line of thinking”
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “make me feel weird for not finding my mistake after the first time I read it”

For each survey, after examining the responses, I determined if the participant’s attitudes were predominately positive or negative, and to what degree, or if they fell somewhere in between or showed conflicting responses. The survey results provided a broad, though not balanced, range of responses on the positive-negative attitude spectrum: 19 positive, 5 neutral, and 7 negative. The survey responses can be found in Appendix F. After collecting this data, I moved to the second stage of data collection, interview analysis.

Interview Analysis

From the pool of 31 survey responders, 15 individuals were identified to provide a maximum variation sampling (Mertens, 2010). I invited those individuals to participate in the next stage of data collection, the interviews. To ensure a diverse database, I selected students who were characterized as having positive (7), neutral (2), or negative attitudes (6). The neutral respondents were least represented, but that was due to their unwillingness to participate in the interview portion of the study.

Using an interview guide, I asked students first about their educational background in order to establish context for their responses: their year at school, major, how much writing was expected in their courses. This also served as a means to make them comfortable talking with me, since these questions were easy to answer and did not require quick thinking or embarrassing self-exposure. The second part of the interview consisted of them elaborating on the questions they were asked in the survey. In the third part of the interview, I asked them to do a think aloud, using a draft from their Composition II class that had instructors' comments; the purpose was to have the students narrate the process they used when reading instructors' comments on paper returned to them. They demonstrated both the physical process (reading from beginning to end or otherwise, time spend reading) as well as the mental processes that took place (what they thought, why they did what they did, etc.), addressing RQs #1.c and #2.

Once the interviews began, analysis of the interview data was ongoing. Each interview was transcribed shortly after the interview took place, with annotations or explanatory notes to better record the nuances of the interview that might not have been evidenced on the audio file. Identifying information was removed from the transcriptions, and pseudonyms were used.

Each transcript was read to identify and label patterns, categories, and connections that appeared relevant, a sorting process known as coding (Seidman, 2013). The transcripts went through two cycles of coding.

The first cycle employed open coding of each transcript, to identify and organize the ideas and events discussed by the participant. The coding was “open” in that the researcher was not constrained to look for predetermined categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The codes or labels were generated from the text. Emergent codes were entered into a coding notebook for continual review and revision (Table 6).

Table 6

Initial List of Codes and Examples

Code	Example
Value of feedback	<p>“I truly think it helps me develop better writing skills.” Alicia</p> <p>“It’s like you get an opinion from a professional of what you’re doing right and what you’re doing wrong.” Annie</p>
Purpose of feedback	<p>“Feedback is for fixing mistakes.” Imamu</p> <p>“Identify what is being done well, but also to identify what’s not being done well.” Allen</p>
Interaction with professor after receiving feedback	<p>“I tried to talk with the professor, went to office hours, but nobody was there.” Bonnie</p> <p>“It really depends...on the person giving it.” Karen</p>
Review of feedback	<p>“No, [I don’t review the fb], I think I remember what was said on the last paper.” Molly</p> <p>“No, it’s just something I keep in my head.” Maria</p>

After all interview transcripts went through the first cycle of coding, the second cycle, or axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), was employed to “compare, reorganize, ‘refocus’ the codes [from the first cycle] into categories, prioritize them into ‘axis’ categories around which others revolve” (Saldana, 2013, pp. 51-52). Though often associated with grounded theory research, axial coding also is useful and appropriate when a qualitative study employs various data collection sources (Saldana, 2013). The transcripts were reexamined to identify patterns and over-arching themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2010), both within individual interview transcripts as well as between the collective interview transcripts. The coded transcripts continued to be examined to determine patterns as well as the relationships between and within those patterns in order to identify shared themes and categories. Some additional codes that emerged as the result of second cycle of coding were the value of writing in future (both academic and professional), how good writing is defined, the relationship with the giver of the feedback (and how that impacts the response to the feedback), and previous familiarity with the academic community (growing up with family members and friends who were instructors).

Reflective analytical memoing (Bailey, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), prompted by reexamination of coding, took place during the course of data analysis. Keeping an informal journal, I focused on the new information as it was reported, looked for new patterns, and reassessed previously identified ones. Additionally, I used memoing as a means to note my questions and concerns as they arose to serve as a reminder of what still needed to be done. This practice assisted me in reviewing and revising patterns and emerging themes. It also provided an evaluative check to ensure that patterns were not overlooked and that patterns were appropriately and clearly identified.

Triangulation

In addition to comparing the students' responses on the survey to their responses in the interviews, I also compared my coding on the interview transcripts with the coding I did on the surveys, and when applicable, the think aloud drafts. This allowed me to triangulate the data collected from the students' interviews with the information they provide in their surveys, focusing on corresponding and contradictory answers, to determine the veracity of their responses and to explore conditionality, or how context, might impact their responses. In five instances students reported on the survey that they revisited feedback, but stated otherwise when they were questioned in the interviews.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a means to establish that the methods and the results of the study have truth-value or credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In addition to building truth-value through rich, detailed descriptions, I employed specific strategies to ensure trustworthiness.

Information examined from different angles, or triangulation, was possible since data collection came from multiple sources using multiple collection strategies (surveys, interviews). This resulted in "the development of converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 1994, p. 92) that were used to corroborate the information and increase the accuracy of the study. Triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness of the study by increasing understanding of the complex phenomenon being studied, with the goal of creating a fuller, more fully integrated picture of the whole (Patton, 1987). Looking at course documents (syllabi and assignments) as well as online

department statements, I was able to determine more fully (as detailed in “Setting” earlier in this chapter) the context in which the students were functioning and spot discrepancies between students’ understanding and stated policy.

Second, student interviews were guided by a pilot-tested interview guide. I revised the pilot guide to increase the content validity (Mertens, 2010) of the questions posed ensure that my questions addressed appropriate content. After noting that five participants contradicted their own answers, I continued to revise the guide after recognizing that my questions needed to be amended to examine more fully and clearly the students’ thoughts and behaviors.

Third, I employed analytical memoing, which promotes reflection on the processes, the data, and the analysis of the research being conducted (Birks et al., 2008). Through reflection and analysis afforded by memoing, I noticed additional patterns not found when coding transcripts. Additionally, I was able to evaluate my practices and to consider emerging theories, all which enhanced the research and outcomes of the study. Writing analytic memos several times each month after coding and analyzing data, I regularly evaluated my research and analysis which in turn prompted appropriate revision, contributing to the validity of the study.

Researcher Role

I have taught college courses for several decades at several Midwestern community colleges and universities. Also, I previously worked in the tutoring center at the college where this study was conducted. My past experiences and current position place me somewhere in between being an outsider and an insider researcher, or in the binary position of “emic (insiderness) and etic (outsiderness)” (Beals et al., 2020). This may have impacted both my data collection and data analysis.

Outsider

As a college instructor, I spent many hours writing feedback and thinking about feedback. However, in this study, I was an outsider: I was not a participant in the personal conversation of feedback that takes place between student and instructor. Instead, I was an observer to that interchange evidenced on the students' papers though my familiarity with college writing courses and assignments, the disciplinary Discourse of first-year writing programs, and the academic expectations of academia. This provided me with a level of understanding that I believe assisted me as the participants and I discussed their conceptualizations of feedback in composition courses.

A related concern was that the composition instructors may have been conflicted about my role and my motives. Although some Writing Program faculty members at the college considered me a friend and colleague and, to a limited extent, an insider due to my past teaching experience, others did not know me at all. Also, I held an administrative, not faculty position. In my pilot study conducted at a different institution where I was employed as a composition instructor, I learned (through conversation with my colleagues), that some of the instructors considered me and my study an invasion into their private student-instructor interaction. Also, because I held a position of some authority at the previous institution as the director of the English 100 courses, some instructors were fearful that I could use the information gathered in some way to judge them or their methods. In this dissertation study, I tried to counter a potential misunderstanding of my motives by clearly articulating to the faculty, in both face-to-face meetings and through emails, that the focus of this study was on individual students' conceptualizations of feedback and that the purpose was to understand more clearly the feedback

process as a whole. Acknowledging that instructors play an essential role in the feedback process, I emphasized that this study was in no way intended to focus on instructors or to evaluate what any individual instructor may be doing. I was transparent and made myself available to address the faculty's concerns without compromising the confidentiality of the student participants. However, only four of the 14 instructors invited me into their classrooms to recruit participants.

Insider

Because I worked in the tutoring center for several years previous to beginning data collection for this study, I was intricately involved in the environment that I studied, making me, in a sense, an insider. My involvement in the college made me as an embedded participant in the culture I was observing. This provided me with access to information that might not be available to an outside observer, resulting in a more accurate picture of the group being studied (Yin, 1994). I entered this study with a solid appreciation and understanding of the complexities of the college's culture, I was familiar and comfortable with navigating the sources of information that assisted in this study, and as a member of the academic community, I did not experience any problem with seeking permission from "gatekeepers" in my efforts to gather information. However, as noted by Becker (1958), the demands of my duties as the director had the potential to distract me from my duties as a researcher. Being diligent about making time to take careful notes and analysis was essential to the completion of this study.

My insider status also was supported by the frequent one-on-one tutoring I provided to the students in the center. Five students whom I personally tutored or assisted in other ways before and during the course of my data collection were participants in this study. My

involvement may have increased the students' level of comfort and trust as they participated in the study. The possibility that some participants compromised their honesty in order to present a positive image of themselves may have existed, but that seems unlikely, since the tutor-tutee relationships are typically seen as partnerships, not hierarchies; the relationship is dependent upon an honest interchange of information between both parties (Fresko, 1996). Additionally, I have found in the research projects I did in my graduate coursework and in my pilot study that students appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences and their opinions; they appeared to be more concerned about being heard than in making an impression. Nonetheless, I was diligent about following through in my data collection, specifically in my interviews, to assess the reliability of the responses shared by the participants.

Navigating the Divide Between Roles

I entered this study positioned as both an outsider and an insider in my role as a researcher. Additionally, I was aware of my previous biased, simplified notions about students and feedback, born in my years of teaching college writing and reading, which I seriously questioned as I watched my students trying to transition into college level courses. In fact, it was this question about perception versus reality that led me to take on this topic for my study. As a researcher, I made a conscientious effort not to allow my personal biases get in the way of my objectivity, being careful to collect and analyze accurately the information that was shared with me by the participants of this study.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology of this study. The use of quantitative research strategies allowed me to identify patterns in students' attitudes and behaviors related to instructor feedback, and the use of qualitative research strategies provided insights into the participants' conceptualizations of instructor feedback.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this study, I sought to explore how college students describe the role and value of course instructors' written feedback. I looked at students' conceptualizations of feedback, specifically how they defined its role and its value; students' processes when reading feedback and what factors influenced those processes; and what students did with the feedback they were given, in particular if they revisited feedback in the process of writing future drafts and if they talked to instructors for clarification or advice.

The data I collected from the surveys and the interviews are presented here as the information pertains to my research questions, specifically, how students conceptualize feedback—specifically how they report its role, value, and the processes they use when reading and responding to it—and how they use feedback in later assignments in the course as well as assignments in other classes. Although this organization does not show the complexity of the individual participants' thought processes and how the separate questions relate to each other, it highlights the patterns exhibited in the group as a whole. The survey data is included as Appendix F, and quotes from the interviews are incorporated into the discussion below.

Research Questions Guiding This Study

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How do students in first-year composition courses conceptualize the written feedback they receive from their composition course instructors?

- a. In what ways do the students describe the role of composition course instructors' feedback they receive on written assignments?
 - b. How do those students describe the value they place on composition course instructors' feedback given to them on their writing assignments?
 - c. How do those students explain the reasoning or thought processes they employ when reading and using composition course instructors' feedback?
2. In what ways do those same students describe how they have used, or will use, composition course instructors' feedback given to them to improve future writing assignments?

The following section will examine students' responses, both on the surveys and in the interviews, in relation to the research questions above.

Conceptualization of Feedback (RQ 1)

To determine students' conceptualization of feedback, I examined what students identified as the role and value of feedback, as well as the thought processes they used to read and respond to it.

The Role(s) of Feedback (RQ 1a)

Survey participants were asked (Question #3) if their instructors talked about how to use feedback; this question was posed to get a better understanding of the culture in which they were functioning. Almost half (14 out of 31) reported that instructors "almost always" or "often" did so. The remaining 17 respondents reported that discussions on feedback "sometimes" or "very seldom" took place. Therefore, the assumption is that the perception of half of the students

participating may have been colored by their previous conception and did not reflect the values of the culture of the writing program itself.

Survey Question #1 asked participants to share their perceptions of feedback by creating a simile that described their attitude toward feedback; the purpose was to provide me with a more concrete understanding of the students' conceptualizations. Using discourse analysis, breaking down the literal and figurative language the students employed, I was able to uncover the participants' underlying attitudes toward or beliefs about instructor feedback by the general tone or imagery provided in their similes. Additionally, the participants were asked to list what they believed to be the role of feedback. The question also came up in the interviews as a means to clarify the brief responses given in the survey.

Feedback for Growth, Improvement, and Reward/Recognition

Out of the 31 surveys examined, 17 of the students' similes indicated that receiving feedback was overall a positive experience since it provided them an opportunity to learn more. The language referenced formative learning, enlightenment, and development. The responses fell into two major categories: those that focused on only the positive and those that acknowledged the good and the bad. The results can be seen in Table 7.

This was reiterated during Ted's interview; he made a comparison of feedback with coaching, the career that he hopes to enter. He appreciated teachers who were like good coaches: "[They] build on what you're good at, and see the other areas that you need to be more well-rounded in." In a similar manner, Courtney remarked, with a smile on her face, "I think feedback improves anything that you're doing." These responses indicate that feedback was perceived to be a valuable tool to guide them to success on their academic and personal journeys.

Table 7

Survey Responses: Feedback Similes (Research Question #1)

Feedback Type	Responses
Personal growth and reward/recognition	<p>Receiving feedback is like an affirmation that someone values my work enough to give their own written opinion on it. Whenever I turn in an assignment, I usually get more excited about the feedback than the grade</p> <p>Feedback is like a confiding friendship or relationship</p> <p>Getting feedback feels like someone cares about your education that they just want to make you a stronger person</p> <p>Feedback is like reassurance. It comforts you...[and it's] disappointing [sic] when it is not provided</p> <p>Getting feedback feels like professors are truly listening to what I had to say or what I wrote for an essay</p> <p>I enjoy getting feedback because it helps enlighten me and show different aspects of writinc [sic]</p> <p>Feedback is like finding a map walking in the forest; you'll never be able to find your way otherwise.</p> <p>Feedback is like bricks. They both are used to help support and build something.</p> <p>Getting feedback feels...like advice... helping you grow</p>
Recognizing weaknesses/strengths to improve	<p>Feedback is like eating new food. Both require you to go out of your comfort zone...the results may or may not be what you expected, but in the end you learn more.</p> <p>Feedback is like watching a dance routine playback on video. When you watch the video you realize what your strengths are and then figure out what you need to improve on.”</p> <p>Feedback is like a movie review in that you find out what you did correctly and what needs improvement.</p> <p>Getting feedback is like playing the flute. Like playing the flute, you never know how well you played until someone else hears it with their prospective.</p>

Table continued on following page

Table 7 (cont.)

Feedback Type	Responses
	Getting feedback is like playing music in an ensemble. When something does not sound right, the director while help the player fix their mistake to make the piece sound better
	Feedback is like getting a shot, no one wants it, but it's not that painful and helps a lot in the long run.
	Feedback is like a piece of sandpaper. While one side is smooth and doesn't bother you in any way, the other side is rough and can rub you the wrong way. However, if you take it as the tool it is meant to be, over time it helps smooth things out.
	Getting feedback is like learning how to ride a bike... it may initially make you feel bad, but it is for the better...it may hurt because you keep falling, but in the end you figure out how not to fall and are able to ride on your own.

Feedback for Identifying Mistakes

Although correction can be an important component for growth and learning, on a more practical level, nine of the 15 interview participants described feedback using binary terminology, specifically talking about identifying what was “right” or “wrong,” with an emphasis on what was “wrong.” Most often, feedback was described as being an assessment tool to identify errors. Phrases that incorporated the concept of “fixing mistakes” was often repeated, regardless of the similes they had created originally in the surveys. Yet, although those students stated that they believed the purpose of feedback was to identify mistakes or errors, eight participants voiced their dissatisfaction with that limited purpose. When asked in the interviews to describe their responses to the feedback received and what they would like to see in the feedback given to them, they reported that they were not satisfied with knowing what is wrong. Instead, they wanted more: more explanation, more detail, more direction.

Fahim felt strongly that feedback “should not just identify what is wrong but what to do about it, how to make it better.” Maria said almost the same thing when she stated that she did not know what to do with the feedback she received: “Give me directions. Tell me what you want and why.” Molly voiced her dissatisfaction about her instructor who “really only marks things wrong without saying why. Sometimes I have to figure it out on my own. But sometimes I can’t!” Similarly, Ted wanted “specifics. A general statement like ‘this needs more development.’ What exactly do you mean by development? What exactly do you want to see?” Maria spoke about a recent paper she received back: “Our professor doesn’t give us our papers back; we just see the grade online. I got a B, but I don’t know why I got a B.”

Elaine was direct about what she felt was a lack of detail in feedback she got from her instructor:

I’d like more specific feedback. I think that’s what part of good, solid feedback is, it is very specific. No disrespect to my professor, but (reads instructor’s comments on draft) – “overall organized.” Does that mean there are parts that aren’t organized? That’s like saying “You’re mostly a nice person.” Don’t sugar coat it for me.

During the think aloud activity during her interview, Annie commented that “In both of these papers, I felt I wasn’t really sure of what I was doing right; I do know what I was doing wrong (laughs), but not what I am doing right. One thing I would like to know is what I’m doing right, you know? (laughs) And honestly, the grade does tell you if you did something right, but I’d like to know what so I can keep doing that.”

Karen wished her instructors would talk more about her ideas and less about the grammar and form. “My English professor last semester wasn’t focused on grammar, she wanted to hear our ideas... I liked her style better just because it was more—I don’t want to say personal, but

she could understand you better. But my English professor right now she is very rigid about form. She doesn't read for content."

This illustrates a pattern that, while these participants saw the role of feedback as a means to identify what they did wrong, they also would appreciate feedback that went beyond correction. They wanted assurances of their strengths as well as their weaknesses, presented with specificity.

Feedback to Punish Bad Behavior

Although the majority of the survey participants described feedback in a positive manner, four students provided similes that conveyed negative emotions, creating comparisons of feedback with acts or behaviors typically associated with power struggles or punishment. Three compared the givers of feedback as authoritarian figures such "parents" and "critics." One participant described feedback "punishment for not following the rules" and another like "having to go sit in time out if he misbehaves."

Though not actually a punishment, feedback was described by another student as being a no-win scenario, "an itch on the bottom of one's foot" that is "almost impossible to relieve," the implication being that he was never able to meet the expectations or satisfy the requirements.

Of note, this negative attitude was not representative of the comments made by the interview participants.

Value of Feedback (RQ 1b)

The respondents on all 31 surveys reported that they found instructor feedback useful. The frequency or degree of helpfulness varied, however. Five students reported it as useful

“sometimes,” 14 as “often, and 12 as “almost always.” Because the survey asked general questions about the value of feedback, but without context, I followed up in the interviews with questions that helped define context or conditions that impacted the students original survey responses. To provide context for answers about the value of feedback, since feedback is a means to develop into a better writer, during the interviews I examined if and how students valued writing and what role they believed writing would play in their academic and professional lives, how they defined good writing, and what other factors came into the assessment of the feedback given to them.

The Value of Writing Well

Of the 15 interview participants in the study, 13 reported that they believed writing well was important. Their reasons ranged from writing being personally fulfilling to writing being a means to an end.

Of those who found writing personally fulfilling, two students spoke of the importance they placed on being able to communicate well to interact successfully with others. Karen, who talked at length about how much she liked journaling and creative writing, spoke of the pleasure of sharing ideas with others: “I’m really passionate about writing, like, I want to know what people think about [what I have to say].” She, however, did not have the same opinion of academic writing because she stated it did not reflect “the real world.” Fahim, a philosophy major who plans to become a lawyer, stated, “Good writing will be important to me no matter what I do. I enjoy being able to express my ideas well.”

Two other students talked about how writing and communicating well would allow them to participate more fully in their future professional lives. Ted, a physical therapy major, said,

I know that physical therapists have write-ups to do about each one of their clients...so [good writing skills are] obviously going to be important in my life. Plus my mom always told me...three components that every job is going to need are reading, writing, and math, no matter what you're doing.

Judy, an undeclared major who plans to go to graduate school in speech pathology, echoed that sentiment:

I think in the work force and anywhere after school finishes, it's going to be so important that I am able to communicate with future employers and future co-workers and those people I will be associating myself with. I know as a speech pathologist... I'd need my writing to be clear and concise.

Three interview participants talked about effective writing skills not for personal and professional fulfillment but as means to a specific end: to get better grades, to write better applications to get into graduate school, or to get better jobs. Molly stated that “[being able to write well] helps you get into places. A lot of places will have you write about yourself.” She believed the ability to write well was essential “in applying for things—I just applied for a few scholarships, and they have you write a lot.” However, she didn't see writing as important in her field, stating, “there's not a lot of writing in computer science [her major].” Courtney, an education major, said, “...even if you're not writing long papers like in college, you still need a good basis to write an email or a resume or anything like that.” Allen, a kinesiology major, saw writing not as a skill needed in his profession but as means for potential employers to determine one's intellect and work ethic: “[Good writing skills] are kind of a model of one's abilities to ... do what's needed, research, being able to formulate [your ideas] and being able to put all that information together.”

Only two of the 15 interview participants stated that they did not believe that writing well is important. Lexi, an undeclared major, stated that her coursework is writing intensive but claimed that “Honestly, no, I don't think [writing skills] are that important. It's like, why do I

need to do this?” She felt that knowing the grammar rules had value, but she mentioned several times that she learned what she needed in her high school AP English class, saying that it was important “to know what you’re doing, which I already do [laughs].” However, her belief that following a set of rules, a skill set that she believed she had mastered, is all one needs to be a successful writer has created a dilemma for her, since she commented that her professors did not hold that same belief. She said that the contexts imposed by her professors were arbitrary and random: “Some teachers just don’t grade like they’re supposed to. I don’t know if the grading scale is necessarily fair. I know when I put forth effort and I actually genuinely worked on this, I know what grade I’m supposed to get.” Writing well, for Lexi, was clearly defined by and limited to rules of grammar.

The second student, Elaine, an older, nontraditional student, voiced a similar complaint, stating that deep down she felt writing well should matter but that in the real world that was not the case: “I think it’s important to articulate your ideas in writing, but...good writing skills are going away... and are becoming more lax” due to the changing tools of communication, such as phones and computers, and the younger generation’s seeming lack of appreciation for correct spelling and clarity. She claimed that “people, especially kids nowadays, can’t spell for diddly” She, like Lexi, talked about being a good writer, but she admitted that she didn’t think it mattered all that much in the end. “I sought out those skills, because to me they are very important, but then again that could be the way I was brought up and what I know,” in contrast to what she believed others valued and practiced.

The bulk of the evidence from both the surveys and interviews supports that students saw value in writing well, whether personally, academically, or professionally. However, they did not define “good” writing in the same ways.

How Students Defined “Good” Writing

Though 13 of the 15 interview participants said that they believed writing was an important skill for success, the students’ definitions of what constitutes “good” writing were varied. The students’ definitions impacted what the students were looking for or expected to find in their instructors’ feedback and how they responded to the feedback provided by their instructors.

Only one student out of the 15 interview participants, Allen, a kinesiology major who claimed he didn’t do much writing outside of his English class, saw good writing in a broad sense involving both content and style. He defined good writing as “being able to formulate ideas well and writing them out, and then putting selected information that I need to put in the paper.”

The remaining 14 interview participants repeatedly equated writing well with having control of grammar, form, and spelling. Although a few commented on effective communication of ideas, most students identified good grammar and punctuation as being more important than content. This was evidenced not only in their comments about good writing but also by what they focused on as they went through the think aloud portion of the interview. Two students in particular expounded on their interest in Standard Written English.

Noor, who spent her early years in both the US and Palestine and whose first language is Arabic, talked about being pleasantly surprised knowing proper grammar and punctuation rules:

Last semester, when I started taking English [in college], I was like, OK, I don’t know where the period goes, I don’t know where this goes, I just know they all go in sentences, you know? (laughs), And then after a while... you have that pause moment, and you know you need a comma and you need a period, or something... And I was like, wait, this is really interesting!

Elaine, a returning student with some professional life experiences, believed that good writing, while having to adapt to context, always depends on knowledge of the standard conventions of writing: “that’s why grammar would be really important because that’s something that will translate into every paper I write.”

The evidence collected from the interviews indicates that these first-year writing students, when questioned, defined good writing as focusing on the rules of Standard Written English, failing to mention the importance of clarity of ideas and communication they mentioned when they spoke of the value of writing.

Respect for the Source of Feedback

Although almost all the students saw value in being able to write well and all 31 survey participants claimed that they believed feedback was helpful, not all students valued the feedback they received from specific instructors. Participants commented on their relationship with the instructor and how it impacted their response to the feedback given; the value of the feedback was directly related to how much they trusted the instructors and/or respected their instructors’ competence.

Two participants described why they did not always value the feedback given to them. Allen commented specifically on how the feedback giver’s attitude impacted how he responded to the feedback given. He said that “the instructors’ attitude – they don’t need to be mean – they can be friendlier. If the professor is mean, maybe I won’t talk with him.” Similarly, Bonnie, a business major, said she did not respond positively to the feedback given in part because of the instructor’s relationship with the class. She said, “He doesn’t know what he is talking about. He

doesn't have much to do with the class. All he does is teach from the book. And he's hard to understand."

Five of the 15 interview participants stated that they did not trust that what their professors told them was true. Molly admitted that she did not look back at instructor feedback because she didn't have confidence in the instructor. She complained that,

They'd want me to change things to write the paper better, but at the same time they weren't sure of these things to change 'cause every time I talked to them about this, they'd be "Oh maybe do this instead" or maybe do this." I felt like there wasn't straightforward feedback.

She also mentioned that "I didn't agree with what [she] said I did wrong." She interpreted her instructor's non-directive comments as indications that the instructor lacked knowledge about or understanding of what the student could do to improve.

Karen also talked about her lack of confidence in the feedback given to her by her English instructor.

The way she wants us to do it is not the way I was taught to do it before [in high school], how you are supposed to do it traditionally. So I was like, what do I do? Should I do it the way she says because that will get me the grade, but I know it's supposed to be done this way. So I don't know what to do. That sounds really condescending and kind of terrible, but I feel like what I was taught before was how it's supposed to be.

Lexi, too, rejected feedback from her professors because the feedback conflicted with the value she placed on her own writing based on her high school experiences. She stated, "Some teachers just don't grade like they're supposed to. I don't know if the grading scale is necessarily fair."

Even Noor, who repeatedly stated she appreciated feedback, said she mistrusted her professor's advice because it contradicted what she was taught previously. When asked to put more opinion in her paper, she said her immediate (internal) response was "I'm like, I don't think your opinions goes in research."

This is similar to what Allen shared about an earlier experience and his lack of trust in his instructor's feedback:

I thought I had a really solid intro, and it sounded really cool, but [my instructor] said 'oh, change it to this way.' I didn't like the way it looked, because how I had written it I thought was really kind of solid. In the end I did change it, more for the grade than my own pleasing. But I did keep a copy (laughs) of how I originally had it.

Two students talked about what they perceived to be the punitive tone of the instructor feedback. Judy felt her instructors were too critical:

I know it's easy to say, 'this is no good, you're doing this really awful.' It's easy to put someone down like that. But it goes much further to say, "Well, you're doing an amazing job at this aspect of your paper"...it goes a long way for both the professors and for improving students' writing.

Fahim said something similar: "[feedback's] not to make the students feel bad, it should be positive."

The responses from the participants support that, as is the case in most interpersonal communication situations, the relationship between the parties involved will impact how messages are perceived. The role of authority which the instructor is assumed to possess will not always be valued if the personal elements of mutual respect in the relationship are not present.

Students' Reports on Their Thought Processes When Reading Feedback (RQ 1c)

Every student in the study, both on the survey and subsequent interviews, claimed that they read the feedback provided by their instructors. However, they did not all approach the reading the same way.

Process

In the interviews, students were asked about the order of reading feedback they typically used when papers are returned to them: did they read the comments and then look at the grade, or did they look at the grade first and then the comments? The process that students reported was split almost evenly between the two options, for the most part supported by the think aloud activity.

Initial focus on comments. Seven students reported that, when a paper was returned to them, they read through the comments first and then looked at the grade. This was supported by the think aloud exercise. Noor said that by reading the comments first, when she sees the grade “it’s like that makes total sense. I can see why she gave me the grade.” Annie said that she “looks at the comments first, and I try to see what the comments are referring to, and I’ll try to work it out.” She admitted that it can be frustrating because “sometimes I get defensive, ‘oh, that’s not true!’” But she said that she believed this is the best way to learn from the feedback.

Judy described her process as follows:

I look at the comments, then I look at whatever [part of the] text she [her instructor] is referring to, and I think about what I could change...any student in their right mind would go to the comments, as I do...I always read the comments because comments are the insights into what the teacher is thinking and how their mind works, in a sense, so anything that they are commenting on, I need to be sure to read...comments are ultimately the most important, and that’s what makes me better as a writer.

If, however, she doesn’t understand the comment or can’t figure out how to change the text, she’ll just keep going. She’ll go back later to see if the later comments help her to understand the earlier ones.

Initial focus on grades. Eight of the 15 students interviewed claimed that they looked at the grade first, then read the comments to understand the grade. Ted said that “My eye definitely

goes to the grade first. When I see a comment, I try to figure it [why I got the grade] out.” Molly reported, “I look first at the grade and then general comments. Then I go back and look at everything else from beginning to end. Even if I’m happy with my grade, I still go back and look at the comments.” Karen said she looked at the grade first; “I feel like that’s the most important part. It shouldn’t be, but I feel like it is.” She also indicated that the comments often “would make me upset” so she didn’t always read them all the way through.

In this group of eight, two students reported that if the grade was good enough, they didn’t bother to look at the comments, or if they did, they didn’t try to work through them to figure out why the instructor made the comment. Fahim admitted that “if it’s something little [low stakes] I’m not going to pay that much attention.” Similarly, Bonnie said, “Depends on time and how much the paper is worth. If I don’t need the extra point, I don’t stretch myself out.”

This evidence indicates when students’ papers are returned, emphasis on the grades might diminish the students’ motivation to read feedback carefully.

Additional Influences

As students talked about their process of reading feedback and what influenced their responses to feedback, two major patterns surfaced: fear and placement of feedback on the draft.

Fear. Fear of feedback was a repeated theme in six of the fifteen students’ interview responses, their comments including embarrassed and nervous laughter to emphatic declarations. The source of the fear could be classified in three ways: fear of the professor, fear of failure, and fear of the writing/feedback process. Certainly, the three categories overlapped.

One student in particular, Courtney, mentioned a form of the word “scared” and “terrified” at least eight times during our interview. She claimed, “I definitely just get scared

every time I turn in an essay...I just get scared seeing a big paragraph [of instructor feedback] at the bottom of a paper...It always just terrifies me when I see it.”

For some, the fear is one of ambiguous intimidation. One student, Noor, stated that even though she generally felt comfortable talking with her professors about her work, she was intimidated when the professor initiated a meeting, either as an end comment on the draft or a verbal statement when handing back a paper: “He’ll say, ‘come see me after class.’ And I was like, ok, I want to come see you after class, but now you are scaring me because [you] didn’t have any other comments on [the paper].” Another student, Allen, who is the son of a college faculty member and generally is used to interacting with his professors, recounted being afraid to talk with his instructor because she was a “stern and not able to understand why I’m struggling. I would be kind of upset to talk with her. I would hate to go in [to talk with her].”

Several feared that feedback was a personal affront to who they were as people or students, not just commentary on a particular paper. Karen talked about her instructor’s feedback getting her upset and that the feedback felt like a personal attack: “Oh, my writing is no good! Why are you yelling at me? All these bad things!” Molly commented that she was afraid of her instructor’s comments and of being perceived a failure: “you don’t want to be seen as stupid, or maybe he brought it up earlier, but you don’t remember.” Elaine talked about being “terrified because I didn’t want to present the image that I didn’t understand what I was doing.” She talked about the previous assignment, about being “physically ill over this paper,” about feeling “stupid... It was humiliating to me. I already struggle enough with my own anxiety.” Her perceived instructor’s insensitivity increased that anxiety.

Placement of feedback. Placement of feedback had an impact as well in terms of how students were able to process the feedback given to them. Two students said that feedback

provided at the end of a paper is not helpful because they could not connect the comments with the correlating parts of the essay. For the feedback to be more useful it needs to be placed next to the areas of the paper to which it applies. Noor said her instructor did not always leave comments on the paper, but instead sends “a bunch of comments in an email.” Noor appreciated that the instructor provided positive and constructive feedback but was confused. She gave an example of when her instructor said, “Oh, you need more opinion [in the paper]. I love your thesis, but you need to relate your opinion back to your thesis. Then I was like, ok, which paragraph do I specifically need to put my opinion? Is that for every paragraph?” Noor would have been happy to make the changes, but she did not know what to do. As stated in an earlier mentioned interview excerpt,

Elaine said during the think-along exercise in the interview, “No disrespect to my professor, but (reads instructor’s comments on draft) – ‘overall organized.’ Does that mean there are parts that aren’t organized?”

Static mental modeling. Although all students in the survey claimed that they found feedback to be helpful, this was contradicted in four of the participants’ comments during the think aloud portion of the interview.

Annie originally stated that the purpose of feedback was to “get an opinion from a professional of what you’re doing right and what you’re doing wrong.” However, during the think aloud when looking at a particular comment from her instructor, she said, “oh, that’s not true! I’m proud of what I did.” Her response showed not an acceptance of the instructor’s “professional opinion,” but instead her reluctance to change the practices and beliefs she brought with her from high school.

Ted likened feedback to coaching, ‘build[ing] on what you’re good at and see[ing] the other areas you need to [improve]...it’s always good to see an outside point of view of what we can do better.’ Yet, during the think aloud, he commented on his instructor’s feedback and her lack of understanding what he was trying to do. Rather than take her suggestion, he stated that “I think I’m still planning to use that for my paper.” He rejected the feedback, planning to move forward relying on the mental model he had previously.

Elaine identified herself as being “one to seek out feedback. I need to know if I’m doing better than I think I am or I’m not even meeting the standard.” However, when responding to her instructor’s comments during the think aloud, “I don’t think we are looking at the same thing...your remark doesn’t even make sense.” Rather than analyze the comments to change her understanding of what the assignment and standards were, she clung to the beliefs she held previously.

Karen reported, “I just like learning in general, I just like, I think it’s just (pause) it’s such an amazing concept, just like learning different things, being able to know so many different things... I just want to know as much as I can about everything!” During the think aloud, however, her comments did not exhibit that love of learning new things. Instead, she stated, “The way she wants us to do [this] is not the way I was taught to do it before...I feel like what I was taught before was how it’s supposed to be.” Her comments demonstrated that she was not open to change the mental models that she formed in her high school classes.

What Students Do with Feedback (RQ 2)

Participants’ responses to the questions on their use of feedback on the surveys in contrast to their comments in the interviews reflected similar contradictions as was the case of

their comments on the value of feedback. This can be seen in how they talked about how they used the feedback and if they approached their instructors for clarification on the feedback provided to better understand what the comments meant (or how to incorporate the recommendations).

Revisiting Feedback

Although all the students claimed they read feedback, and all reported that the feedback was helpful, only six of them reported that they actively revisited/reread the feedback before or while working on next assignment despite the fact that the assignments in their composition classes typically build on each other, with earlier assignments leading to the next . Seven of the students reported that they did not review feedback, and the remaining two reported that it depended on the grade they received on the assignment.

During the interviews, I examined students' explanations for why they did or did not revisit the feedback provided. The two distinct camps of thought are discussed below.

Those who revisited feedback from previous papers. Those who revisited instructor feedback explained why they did so. Ted stated that rereading the feedback while working on the next assignment or a final draft helped him focus and improve: "I can see it in front of my face what I need to fix." Annie, too, felt that reviewing feedback was very helpful. Even though she read the feedback previously, she acknowledged that she didn't remember it; however, by rereading her feedback, Annie claimed, "I noticed stuff I did wrong. It really helped!" When Noor was asked if she reviewed instructor feedback, she affirmed, "I do, I pull out everything! [My papers] really improved from the comments!"

Three students talked about the value when working on assignments that had multiple drafts. Allen noted: “I would have feedback on [one version] versus what I have on my computer and see, oh, that’s different, so I go I and like change it to how it needs to be changed.” Alicia voiced a similar practice: “I do [go back] for [my writing class] ...because we typically do a lot of the same format paper.” Fahim recounted how reviewing the feedback on one of his earlier English assignments helped him while drafting the next assignment and made the task easier; “When I started my last paper...I actually looked at it and could use about half of the stuff from my last paper.”

Although these students represent only one third of the interviewed participants, their responses support that revisiting feedback was helpful to them.

Those who did not revisit feedback from previous papers. Of the interview participants, seven of the students admitted that they did not review the feedback provided on previous papers. Students gave varied reasons for not reviewing feedback, but two prominent themes emerged. Five of the participants in this group reported feedback was not necessary because they remembered previous feedback from their instructors, and two participants stated that the review had no value.

The first category, those students who did not feel the need to revisit feedback was the most populated. Their comments are shown in Table 8.

Courtney also said that although she did not review the feedback provided to her, she liked having it available, should she need it: “You can always refer back to it.... I think it’s a safety net.” She said she was confident, however, that she was able to remember what she needed.

Table 8

Participants Who Remembered Feedback

Participant	Comment
Maria	“No, it’s just something I keep in my head, like don’t forget to proofread, little things like that.”
Molly	“No. I think I remember what was said on the last paper.”
Imamu	“I remember. I make an effort to remember. I must have it here (points to his head).”
Courtney	“I’ve mentally put that in my head, and I’ll remember it for the next paper...I just kind of prepare myself for the next paper and figure out how I am going to write it.”
Karen	“I don’t go back and look at it, but I remember, like she commented on like grammar, watch out for grammar. I Just think about it. Like last semester my teacher made a comment, you need to sound more professional, that’s something I always think about now when I write.”

The second category of students who did not revisit feedback consisted of those who described the process as not being worth the effort since it had no carry-over value. Only two of the 15 interview participants fell into that category. Their comments are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Participants Who Stated Feedback Had No Value

Participant	Comment
Lexi	“I didn’t try to fix it. The essay is already submitted I can’t resubmit it, so what’s the point? I know I struggle mostly with run-ons and grammatical errors; that’s just my big thing.”
Elaine	“I think the feedback from this class doesn’t translate into my other classes. They’re so different. This is feedback on this style of writing, but that is not the style of writing I’m using in my other classes.”

Although the number of students who made this claim was small, this attitude is reflected in students' comments (see the section on "Students' Processes When Reading Feedback" earlier in this chapter). It is the same reasoning used by those students who reported that they did not read the feedback initially because they were satisfied with the grade, especially on what they defined as low-stakes assignments. They saw no reason to read the feedback because they saw no reason to change anything.

Talking with Professors about Feedback

Reading feedback is one thing; understanding what was written is another. Conferencing with one's instructor can provide an opportunity for clarity and comprehension. As reflected in their course syllabi, discussed earlier in Chapter 3, a majority of the instructors in the first-year writing program supported student/teacher conferencing. The majority of course syllabi (13 out of 20) specifically referenced opportunities for students to meet with their instructors to discuss their essays and encouraged students to talk with them about their work and address their questions and concerns.

The potential problem of not understanding feedback was evidenced in the participants' responses. On the survey, only 10 of the 31 students reported, in answer to Question #6, that they usually understood (often, almost always) instructor feedback; additionally, in our interviews, half of the 15 participants admitted, both during the think alouds and general conversation, they were not sure what the feedback given to them meant or how they should go about acting on that feedback. Survey Question #7 asked the participants if they talked with their instructors for clarification of feedback; of the 31 participants, only four reported that they "almost always

approach their instructors if they had questions about the feedback provided, and six “often” claimed to do so.

Although the survey did not ask students to provide an explanation as to why they did or did not attempt to talk with their instructors, the interviews provided a fuller understanding of the reported rationale.

Those who talked with instructors about feedback received. Typically, those students who talked about meeting with their professors did so because they valued the clarification so they would be able to make appropriate changes to produce better work as well as increase their understanding of the material.

Noor stated that she frequently approached her instructors when she had questions: “I do it a lot... If you take those comments from him, when you are working on the next assignment, you will get a better score. So I feel like if you want that better score, you have to attempt to go to the instructor.” When I asked her if it was easy for her to do so, she replied, “I don’t think I’m bold. I just like to know why I’m getting grades and what their opinion is.”

Allen, the son of a professor at the college, claimed he was for the most part comfortable approaching his instructors with questions: “If I had a question about feedback, I’d ask, ‘Why did you pick that particular thing to change?’ I’m just curious, and I want them to provide insight into why.

Imamu had moved to the United States only a few years ago and appreciated support adapting to his new culture, and that included working with and learning from his instructors:

I go to the teacher with my draft and tell him, do whatever you want. I need to know. I do this because I want to know, and his comments made me reevaluate, rethink my ideas. I am comfortable going to my professors. My daddy was a teacher. And he said, “it’s a hard job if you want to be good.” I trust my teachers.

When Judy was asked about what she did when she had questions about feedback, she replied,

I would go straight to the professor, not to confront them but to ask, ‘Could you please explain what you were trying to point out? I can read [this comment] perfectly well, but I am unsure of the message behind it, it does not make sense to me. Could you please read it for – re-explain it to me?’ Then I could readjust how I fixed it to meet their standards or opinions.

Alicia voiced a similar confidence when talking about approaching her instructor. “I would go ask her. I feel very comfortable with my professors now. I feel like, well, half of my professors have been very open to communication.” She did, however, relate a story of a previous experience from the semester before:

I had one professor last semester that didn’t offer any office hours, he wasn’t open to communicating. He would never answer emails. He was very passionate about his subject and taught the course as if we were all majors. The answer was that, and there was nothing else. If we didn’t know it, it seems like it was our own loss.

As much as Alicia saw the value in talking with her instructors for additional feedback, she recognized that her practice of doing so would be impacted by the instructor’s approachability.

Maria, too, said she talked with her instructors when she had questions about the feedback she received:

I feel comfortable talking with my instructors about the feedback they have given. Sometimes, though, I’ll get hesitant. I don’t want to come off as being disrespectful, I don’t want them to think I’m questioning their authority or their way of teaching. But I’ll say something like ‘can you clarify this?’ I don’t have a problem doing that. They are pretty cool about it. They want to make sure I get it.

Karen also stated that talking with her professors helped her at least as much as the written feedback: “I like the verbal talking about it. I feel that in-person you get the meaning behind the words. I feel it’s better understood.”

Lexi stated that she typically liked conferencing with an instructor about feedback. However, she voiced her concern that even after discussing feedback with her professor, she was still unclear about what to do: “When I asked her how I can improve this, I don’t know, leaving that conversation, I was still confused. I received no help.” Lexi brought this up a second time during the interview, as she did her think- aloud: pointing to a comment on her paper she said, “This one still doesn’t make sense after talking with her. She didn’t really explain what the problem is.”

Those who did not (usually) talk with instructors about feedback received. Twenty-one out of the 31 survey participants reported that they did not typically make the effort to ask for clarification, 13 responding “sometimes” and 8 responding “seldom” in contrast to the 6 who responded “often” and the 4 who claimed “almost always.” One repeated reason for not asking for clarification was that personal schedules were too complicated, making it inconvenient to have that kind of conversation. That was often linked to how high the stakes for a particular assignment were or if the students were satisfied with the grade they received.

When I asked Annie during our interview if she would approach her instructor, she focused on her busy schedule: “I guess I could do that, but I’m probably not likely to do that. It seems in class we are always doing things, and I don’t have a lot of time to talk with professors. I’m on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule, so it’s not like I can come in early or late. Because I have a class before and right after.”

Fahir said something similar, emphasizing how busy he was, but also acknowledged that his action would depend on how greatly his grade was impacted:

Sometimes I do [talk with my instructor], and sometimes I don’t. If it’s something little, I’m not going to pay that much attention. I am so busy. I think it’s the student’s

responsibility to look up stuff that is confusing. Again, I don't have a lot of spare time, so I can't always meet with my professor.

Courtney echoed that sentiment saying,

[if I didn't understand the instructor's comments, I would just (pause) be a little frustrated about that...I think I would just put it in a mental cabinet...[I] usually [don't talk with my professor] if the grade is what I'm looking for. For me personally, I feel if the grade is good, then I don't need to talk with them, but I definitely read what they have to say just so I know how they are feeling about what I am writing.”

Member of both groups of students related student/instructor conferencing in relation to their grades, but the difference between them seems to be that the first group sees feedback as a tool for doing better and the second sees in more in terms of assessment.

Relationship Factors

Similar to earlier comments made about the value of feedback, the value of conferencing is also interconnected with the students' relationship with their instructors. Three interview participants specifically referenced their perceived relationship with their instructors and how it impacted their interactions as well as their performance in class.

Judy talked about meeting with her instructors as part of a relationship; she stated that “I make it one of my first goals to make sure ...I'm communicating with my professors... Both sides have to share and to listen.” Karen summed up her attitude about meeting with her instructors: “It really depends on how comfortable I am with the professor because I've had teachers before that I didn't care about the grade, I just wanted to get out of class. But I've also had professors who I was like, I want to know why, I want to get better.” Elaine, though ambivalent about the value of the feedback provided by her English professor, about whom she had voiced her dissatisfaction, she recognized that that having a conversation with a professor

she trusted would have provided her with the clarity she valued: “I’m the kind of person that if I have a question, I need an answer. I need to be in the room with the teacher.”

Though the number of participants who identified instructor approachability as a factor in their learning process is only a fraction of those students interviewed, the impact is not without merit.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of my findings based on the research questions that guided my study. Most students claimed they value good writing and that they read and valued instructor feedback. However, the majority stated that they are not likely to go back and review the feedback, nor are they likely to talk with their instructors if they need clarification. Their reasons included they trusted their memory and therefore did not need to consult the feedback, they didn’t see the need if they felt the assignment was low-stakes, and/or they did not trust their instructors and therefore did not trust their feedback. Two additional reasons are one, that most of the students did not see feedback on one paper as being transferable to another, so they were not motivated to take the time to review, and two, they just don't have the time.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this case study was to explore how college students describe the role and value of course instructors' written feedback. The goal was to get a better understanding of how students approach feedback, how they engage with it, and if they use it to become better writers. In this chapter I will discuss the implications of this study. They will be discussed as they relate to the original individual research questions. The chapter ends with some recommendations for classroom instructors and for further research.

Discussion

Through the use of an online survey and individual interviews with the think aloud exercises, this study's Research Questions focused on the following student conceptualizations of feedback:

- the role of feedback,
- the value of feedback,
- the thought processes used when reading feedback, and
- the students' descriptions of how they use feedback to improve future written assignments.

The data collected from this study indicate that although students report that they read and value the feedback provided, they do not use it to improve future drafts, supporting previous research

findings (Hepplestone & Chikwa, 2014). However, this study goes further by exploring the reasons participants shared to explain their behavior.

Role of Feedback

In the survey, all participants stated that feedback served a purpose and was useful. Upon examination of the student-generated similes on the survey and their responses in the interviews, these were clarified further. They identified the purpose of feedback as being to a tool for growth, a means to correct one's mistakes, or both.

Participants stated that feedback leading to growth meant that they believed it helped them not only become better writers but also contributed to their personal development and self-awareness, although this did not always correspond with their later comments about how they actually used feedback. Those participants who saw feedback as a means of correction generally stated that the comments let them know what they did wrong, but some also saw it as punishment or chastisement. These conclusions run parallel to the finding of Sommers (2006), whose research concluded that feedback was an important factor contributing to a student's sense of belonging or alienation.

A majority of the students in the survey reported that that their instructors did not talk about the purpose of feedback in class, and this was consistent with what students said in their interviews. That may account for why students do not understand or use feedback in the manner that the individual instructor anticipates, since none of the participants could recall their instructors, neither in class nor on other documents, clarifying how the feedback was to be used in the context of the individual classes. This may be a reason for disconnection that is the source of frustration for many instructors, and students as well.

Value of Feedback

All 31 survey participants and most of the interview participants (13 out of 15) stated that writing well was important to them—for school, their careers, or their personal situations—and therefore they saw the feedback provided to them as a valuable tool to achieve that goal. This contrasts the findings of the study conducted by du Toit (2012), that stated students claimed feedback was not helpful.

However, the participants in this study did not see all feedback as equal. The value of the feedback was impacted by their opinion of or relationship with the instructor giving it. Feedback was less valuable if they felt the instructor was unkind, unfair, or incompetent. This supports the findings of Calhoun-Dillahunt and Forrest (2013), whose study highlighted the importance of the relationship of the student and instructor in the feedback process.

Another factor was the student's connection with the academic community; those students who had teachers in their families were more likely to trust their instructors, which may be due to their familiarity with and comfort in navigating the academic Discourse community. This pattern is not surprising, though it has not been the focus of other researchers.

How Students Read and Process Feedback

All 31 students surveyed claimed they read instructor feedback; that claim was repeated by the 15 students in individual interviews. During the think aloud portion of the interview, students were asked to demonstrate the processes (both physical and mental) they employed when reading. Several repeated issues impacting the care and comprehension with which the

students read the feedback surfaced in the interviews: surface reading versus close reading, placement of feedback, and affective barriers.

Careful Reading and Analysis of Feedback

In order to understand how students approached feedback, I had students perform think alouds as they read through the feedback on their graded drafts they brought to the interview. Although think alouds are often used as a technique to better understand an individual's metacognitive process (Ku & Ho, 2010), I had not seen them used in previous research on feedback. The think alouds helped me assess what "reading feedback" looked like to the participants.

Although all students previously stated, both on the surveys and in the interviews, that they read the feedback given to them, when working through the think alouds with the interviewees, most exhibited a surface-level reading of the feedback, looking at the comments but not responding to or reflecting on them. Only six (out of 15) students talked about and demonstrated how they analyzed the comments and tried to make sense of them: what the comments meant, what the student could have done differently, and how the feedback explained the grade received. The others nine interviewees stated that they read the feedback but did not work through what was being said: they did not analyze the comments, they did not try to decipher what it really meant or the implications of it. Additionally, two students admitted that in those instances that they were satisfied with the grade they had received, they actually didn't read the feedback.

This can explain the seeming disconnect that occurs when students do not make significant revisions to subsequent drafts. The problem did not seem to be that the students

hadn't looked at the feedback; in fact, all the students in this study reported that they did, typically. The actual stumbling block was that the students didn't read the comments closely or carefully. Most of the participants looked at the feedback as it related to one assignment and did not voice any connection of the feedback with the bigger picture of their own writing practices. Because the feedback had no apparent connection to future assignments, they did not use it to change their mental model.

Placement of Feedback and its Impact

Where the feedback was placed on the drafts impacted how students processed the feedback given to them. Students stated that feedback provided at the end of a paper or on a separate rubric sheet was not helpful because the students said they could not connect the comments with the correlating parts of the essay. For the feedback to be more useful, it needs to be placed next to the areas of the paper to which it applies. This relates not only to editing concerns, but also the broader writing concerns, such as idea development and coherence. Students wanted to know specifically what parts of the text need to be developed or what parts don't flow.

Fear of Feedback

Fear of feedback was a repeated theme in eight of the fifteen students' interview responses, their comments including embarrassed and nervous laughter to emphatic declarations. Their fear made them reluctant to read what their instructors had written. The source of the fear could be classified in three ways: fear of the professor, fear of failure, and fear of the

writing/feedback process and their perceived incompetence. These responses can be explained by the findings of Sommers (2006), who focused on feedback as a cause of alienation.

Not surprisingly, these responses corresponded with the students' responses to the role of feedback. Those students who considered feedback a tool for growth were likely to embrace feedback as an opportunity; for them, feedback provided information that allowed them to change their mental model of effective communication. Those participants who saw it as a tool for correction or chastisement were more likely to see it as a means to see themselves in a more negative light, perhaps reinforcing the mental model with which they came into the class.

How Students Use Feedback

Two ways that students reported they could use instructor feedback was by revisiting feedback before writing their next paper and conferencing with their instructor to have a better understanding of the feedback and how to implement it. However, during the interviews, students reported that in practice they typically do not do either one.

Revisiting Feedback

An apparent discrepancy between the survey answers and the interviews was apparent when students discussed revisiting feedback. More than half (18 of 31) of the survey participants stated that they consulted previous feedback before writing the next paper, but this was not corroborated in the interviews. In fact, most students (11 of the 15 students interviewed) specifically stated they did not look at feedback after the initial reading. The two most cited reasons they gave for not looking at feedback or talking with their instructors were that they were

able to remember what the instructor has said or were aware of what aspects of their writing needed work or that the review was too much work or too time-consuming.

Conferencing with Instructors

Additionally, most participants did not meet with their instructors if they had questions about the feedback provided. All 31 survey participants admitted there were times they were confused about the feedback given them or did not know how to go about making the recommended changes, yet majority (21) stated they did not take advantage of the opportunity to talk with their instructor about their concerns, despite being aware of conferencing opportunities. These numbers reflect the responses interview participants shared. The two most mentioned excuses for not following up with the instructor were that the students were too busy or that they were satisfied with the grade they received on the assignment. They were not motivated to use the opportunity to make changes in their process and understanding to revise their mental modeling to improve their communication.

Discussion Summary

This study supports findings of previous research, mostly those that relate to student behaviors, if they read and use feedback, and students' appreciation of the student/instructor relationship that impacts how they read and respond to feedback. However, this study has provided additional insights, mostly related to students' attitudes and thought processes. It uncovered their rationale for reading—or not reading—instructor feedback due to factors such as fixed mental modeling, their familiarity and a sense of inclusion in the academic Discourse community.

Recommendations

This study supports findings of previous research, mostly those that relate to student behaviors. However, this study has provided additional insights, mostly related to students' attitudes and thought processes. As a result, I have recommendations both for classroom instructors to increase the likelihood that the feedback they provide will be read and utilized by their students and for researchers to delve further into the study and understanding of the phenomena of feedback.

Classroom Instruction

Looking at the responses provided by the participants in this study, I identified five instructional practices that can be implemented to increase the likelihood that students will use feedback more productively than they do at present. My recommendations are

- Take time to explicitly state the purpose of the feedback provided
- Use written feedback with conferencing
- Invite students into the academic Discourse community
- Establish one's own ethos as an instructor
- Show connections between assignments to other assignments and the larger world

State the Purpose of Feedback and the Process \Involved

Because all the students in this study indicated that their instructors did not explicitly talk about feedback in class, students perceived that the practices they utilized in reading and responding to feedback in previous high school classes were appropriate in their college writing

classroom. They relied on their established habits. Instructors and students alike would benefit if instructors were more forthright, clear-speaking, and explicit in their discussion of the nature of feedback in general.

Students could gain valuable insights if instructors gave explicit explanation verbally in class of the intended purpose of the feedback provided. This is supported by a study done by Orsmond et al. (2005) that demonstrated that feedback can help students' understanding of their environment in order to participate more actively, but they found that their participants did not understand the "multiple dimensions" (p. 381) of feedback. Their recommendation was that students be directed through discussions, emphasizing the participative nature of feedback and learning, acknowledging the communal aspects of learning.

In practice, this might include regularly sharing anonymous examples from students' drafts with the class as a whole, looking at both the text and the comments, discussing why the comments were made, what they mean, and the ways, strategies, resources students can act upon the feedback provided. This could eliminate some of the anxiety or fear that students reported they felt about feedback and their abilities when they see that others in the class also struggle with similar issues. Additionally, it would allow students to take control of their learning by grappling with the complexities of feedback and examining their own mental processes or mental modeling as they read through and analyze feedback. One other advantage is that it provides the students with practice and instruction in close reading.

This is not to say that all professors must—or should—accept the same philosophy about the purpose of feedback, be it summative, formative, or something else, but without that discussion, students will view feedback from the perspective they have developed from previous

experiences. Explicit discussion would help eliminate inaccurate impressions that students brought with them from other classrooms.

Use Written Feedback with Conferencing

Though instructors, in their syllabi, encouraged students to meet with them for conferences, most of the students in this study did not take advantage of the opportunity for various reasons, as presented in Chapter 4. Yet, when I asked the students their description of ideal feedback, almost all indicated that feedback provided in a conversation together with the instructor coupled with written feedback on the draft was the preferred form. They stated that the written feedback provided them with a mental reminder, but the conversation was needed to get answers to questions and to clarify the concepts being discussed. This is supported by a study by Anast-May et al. (2011), which determined that conferencing provides an opportunity to promote reflection and conversation to facilitate learning and change.

To provide both the comments and the conversation, scheduling student/instructor conferencing during class time is recommended. Encouraging students to utilize instructors' office hours is recommended, but those times might not work for some students due to scheduling conflicts with other classes or extra-curricular obligations. Additionally, some students, as reported in this study, are intimidated by talking with their instructors and would not be bold enough or motivated enough to take that extra step. Making the conferences mandatory at time they would normally be in class eliminates the element of having to make that decision. Although some instructors may be hesitant to give up valuable class instruction time, this opportunity to provide students with specific, individual attention would outweigh what might be gained in classroom discussions or lectures. In addition to the information shared, this practice

would be a step in establishing a stronger relationship with students as individuals, which my participants claimed they valued.

Invite Students into the Academic Discourse Community

The participants in this study who had close relationships with teachers, specifically family members who were teachers, were more likely to trust the feedback provided. They also talked about the importance that doing well in school had for them. Coming from a Discourse community enmeshed in higher education, they were more familiar with the practices and values of that community, making the transition to college courses and college writing assignments easier for them.

Another aspect connected to the values and practices of the Discourse community is that some transitioning students do not have a strong belief in their own locus of control (Rotter, 1966), their own abilities to share their own learning, and their responsibility to be a self-advocate and to take ownership of their learning in college. Though many campuses now have “first-year experience” courses to help new students adjust to their new environment, the student would be helped by additional direction from their content area instructors.

Helping students understand the academic Discourse community which they are now a part, including the practices, values, and language of that community, could eliminate confusion. Equally important is that the instructors treat the students as though they are actually a part of that community, helping them navigate and adjust to this new environment. According to a study by Sommers (2006), feedback was identified as the single most important factor contributing to the students’ sense of belonging to or alienation from the academic setting. Using formative

feedback, instructors can use their comments as a tool to bridge students into the academic discourse community.

A way to make that happen would be to create a safe, comfortable space for students to transition into their new academic Discourse community, sharing the language and practices that are part of that community. I taught at a university that directed us not to use terminology (pathos, logos, ethos) that might be off-putting to our students and to use simpler terms (emotion, logic, credibility). However, that practice limits the students' opportunity to participate fully in the larger Discourse community, where those terms are frequently used. I recommend that instructors use the formal terminology and concept that the students will be expected to understand and use, but carefully make connections with what they already know. Additionally, instructors should provide an explanation of why certain practices are valued as well as strategies to implement those practices. Spend time explaining not just what they need to know, but also provides the why and the how of how to achieve that goal. These strategies will contribute to the students' ability to move beyond their high school mental model of practices and develop more mature, appropriate mental models.

Establish One's Own Ethos

Students in composition courses should be familiar with the rhetorical appeal of *ethos*, as students are informed of the important role that the credibility of the writer/speaker plays in delivering a message. Instructors remind student-writers that the image of themselves that they present in their texts will be influenced by word choice and tone, for example. However, according to Peary (2014), instructors seldom consider the image of themselves they create in the classroom and when they provide feedback. This failure to do so may have unanticipated results.

This was indicated in the comments provided by several interviewees. Five of the 15 participants stated that they did not trust their instructor's feedback because they did not trust the competency of their instructors. Much of that had to do with the seemingly ambiguous instructor's word choice when giving feedback. What may seem to some as giving students choices ("maybe you should do x" or "you might consider") was perceived by one student as the instructor's uncertainty or lack of knowledge. An instructor does not need to be dictatorial when giving feedback, but one can provide constructive comments by explaining what the issue is, why it is problematic, and then explore options available to the student. This will evidence that the instructor's knowledge without taking away the autonomy of the writer. Establishing one's ethos is a sound rhetorical practice; instructors might consider attempting to do so, both in the classroom and in the feedback they provide, more explicitly.

Show Connections to Other Assignments, Other Classes, the Larger World

Most of the students who participated in this study said they saw no connection between what they wrote in their composition classes to what they needed to write for other classes. In fact, many of them did not see much of a connection between the individual assignments in the composition course itself. The assignments are viewed as products, when instead the focus should be on the process. Additionally, because students often are not provided sufficient support in discipline specific writing tasks, the responsibility of helping students see writing as a recursive, interrelated interdisciplinary process falls heavily on the shoulders of college composition instructors (Thonney, 2011).

Focusing on the process is the first step. By helping students understand the functional beliefs about the connection of competent writing and academic/professional success, instructors

can inspire students to place greater value on the resource provided to them, as well as increase their motivation (Bruning & Horn, 2000). This is not limited to instruction in writing classes, however. Providing opportunities for students to engage in authentic learning experiences that tie in with their academic and professional interests not only would provide motivation but are “a critical element for learning to occur” (Luo et al., 2017, p. 143).

One way to put this into practice in a writing class is to allow students to write about topics in their anticipated field of study and to use the formatting style which they will be expected to use in future assignments. Another is to provide students project that require them to grapple with issues that impact them personally and on which they may actually have an impact in their community. Although this may create more work on the part of instructors who may need to go out of their comfort zone both in terms of content and style, the investment would allow students to transition more capably into the Discourse community they wish to participate.

Considerations for Future Research

This research was conducted as a case study, and as such might not reflect the attitudes and behaviors of a common college culture. In order to gain broader insights on students’ attitudes and behaviors related to instructor feedback, further research is warranted in three areas: studies involving larger populations, studies involving more inclusive populations, studies that explore populations in other disciplines, and studies focusing more rigorously on the relationship between feedback and the academic discourse community.

Student Population and the Positive/Negative Spectrum

Though surveys and the interviews in this case study included a range of responses, the participants' responses were more heavily weighted on the neutral to positive side of the spectrum. To gain additional insights to change behaviors and increase students' chances for academic success, future researchers could study a larger population of students who more authentically represent that broader range of attitudes in order to get a more complete picture of college students' perceptions of feedback. With a fuller understanding of why and how students process feedback, educators could provide better support for the students in their classes.

Unique Nature of the Institution

The students at this institution are not representative of the general common college culture. These students have elected to attend a small private four-year school with admissions requirements that include an ACT score equivalent to the national average and a class ranking in the top half of their secondary school. This excludes a more general student population attending colleges and universities: those who have scored lower than the national average and those who have not placed in the top half of their graduating class. Additionally, according to the college website at the time, the ratio of faculty to students was 1:14. The smaller class sizes allow instructors to spend more time with individual students and the work they submit, which may have had an impact on how students related to the feedback provided. Research involving students on a larger, more diversified campus with less rigorous admissions requirements, larger class sizes would provide additional insights.

Student Populations in Other Academic Disciplines

This study focused on students enrolled in college composition courses for several reasons, including my familiarity with the department faculty and the discipline as well as participants' access to drafts with feedback. However, what may hold true about students' attitudes on feedback in composition classes may not be the same beliefs they have about feedback in other classes. Examining disciplinary differences relating to feedback would provide valuable insights into ways to promote student success.

Connection to the Academic Discourse Community

Sommers (2006) claimed that feedback was the single most important factor contributing to the students' sense of belonging to or alienation from the academic setting; the information I collected in the course of the interviews reflected that the significance of that connection. Students who likened feedback to conversation also talked about the respectful relationship between the two parties involved, in contrast to those who talked about feedback as a one-way process. However, I believe this is an area that could be explored more rigorously, specifically how instructors can use feedback to provide a stronger bridge into the academic community.

Summary

This chapter presented a summary of the study, a discussion of findings, and pedagogical and research implications. The purpose of my study was to get a better understanding of how students approach feedback and if they use it to become better writers. The most important implication of this study is that instructors need to provide more explicit

explanation about feedback provided in their courses: what is used for, how to process it, and how to implement it in future papers.

As a researcher-practitioner, this study caused me to reevaluate my own beliefs and practices. I am more careful about the language I use in the feedback I provide, both to establish my credibility and to invite my student to participate in the academic Discourse community. I take time in class to discuss feedback—what it is, how to access it, how to use it—every time I return assignments, and I regularly schedule conferences during class time. Most importantly, I remind myself that when my students are reading my feedback, the process is a complicated one, and I am aware of my responsibility to encourage them to be fuller participants in the academic discourse community.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT FLIER

**Are you currently taking English 106?
Will you participate in a research study on
instructor feedback?**

I am currently working on a research project that explores how students enrolled in English 106 conceptualize instructors' written feedback.

Participants will complete a short online survey (5 minutes) that can be accessed by using the QR code at the bottom of this page or at the following link (I'll be glad to email you the link for easier access):

https://elmhurst.edu/qualfrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8jqg1FKxPAnth8F

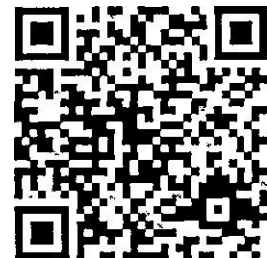
As an incentive, survey participants will have a chance to win a \$10 gift card from the Elmhurst College bookstore.

If you participate in the survey, I might contact you to set up an interview to learn about your experiences and practices in more detail. Interviewees will have a chance to win a \$30 gift card from the bookstore. However, you are under no obligation to commit to an interview.

All information will be kept confidential and will not be shared with your instructors. You may withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Your participation (or non-participation) will have no impact on your grade in your English class.

For more information, come by my office in the Learning Center in the Frick Center, Room 229, or email me at the address below.

Susan Roach susan.roach@elmhurst.edu 630-617-3155



APPENDIX B

SURVEY

SURVEY

Q1 - Creating a simile. Creating a simile. A simile is a comparison of two seemingly different things to emphasize a feeling or attitude, such as "A college diploma is the key to success because it opens the door to more opportunities," or "My backyard looked like a lake after last night's storm; most of the grass was covered with water!" I'd like you to create a simile of your own, along with a brief explanation of how or why the two things are alike. The answer will look like this: Simile example #1 Baking a cake is like a chemistry experiment. They both involve a series of steps to be *performed*. Although the baker and the chemist may think they know what will happen, they can never be sure what the end result will be. OR, you might write: Simile example #2: Baking a cake is like painting. Like painting, baking allows you to mix together all sorts of individual, simple elements to create something that is altogether different and complex that can bring joy to many in this survey, I am interested in how you view written feedback from your instructors. No "*correct*" answer exists. What *matters* is that *your* answer is an honest attempt to capture your ideas or feelings. Please choose one of the two formats below (focusing on feedback itself or the process of receiving it) to create your simile:

Feedback is like __. How or why?

OR

Getting feedback is like (or feels like) __. How or why?

Q2: I receive written feedback from my instructor on written assignments.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q3: My instructor takes time in class to talk about feedback.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q4: I carefully read the feedback given to me.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q5: I find it difficult to access feedback on electronically graded assignments.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q6: I understand the feedback given to me.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q6: I understand the feedback given to me.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q7: I talk with my instructor about the feedback given to me.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q8: The feedback given to me is helpful.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q9: I consult the feedback from a previous paper before or as I write my next paper.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q10: Generally speaking, I wish my instructors gave me more feedback.

- Almost Always Often Sometimes Very Seldom

Q11: What do you believe to be the purpose of written feedback? You may list as many answers as you believe are relevant.

APPENDIX C
CONSENT FORM

Northern Illinois University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Dissertation Pilot Study
College of Education

Researcher: Susan Roach, Graduate Student

Title of Study:

How Do Students Enrolled in College Writing Courses Perceive the Role, Value, and Use of Instructor Feedback?

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore how students enrolled in a college writing course describe their perceptions of feedback, its value, and its use, on academic writing assignments. The study is intended to address a gap in qualitative research: college students understand feedback as a metacognitive tool.

Duration:

Your active participation will require writing a short reflection and answering a short survey, intended to take no longer than 30-45 minutes, and, if selected, taking part in a 45-60 minute private interview.

Procedures:

The written reflections and surveys will be written outside of class-time. For interviews, you will be asked to meet with me at a time and location (on the PUC campus) of your convenience to be interviewed individually: this interview will be audio-recorded.

Risks/Discomforts:

Any risks or discomforts associated with this study are minimal. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Benefits:

No direct benefits are available for participants. However, students may develop a greater awareness of their own metacognitive processes in relation to feedback, perhaps using that self-awareness to increase their success in future situations in and beyond the academic environment.

Confidentiality:

Interviews will be scheduled individually to ensure privacy. As soon as I have transcribed the recordings, the audio files will be erased. All documents, including the interview transcripts, will not contain your name or other identifying information. All research data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my office for three years after the conclusion of this study and then will be destroyed. The data from the study may be published; however, you will not be identified by name.

Offer to Answer Questions:

If you have any questions about study-related activities, you may call me at 815.753.9272. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at 815.753.8588.

Voluntary Participation:

You do not have to participate in this study. You may choose not to participate, or you may quit at any point without penalty.

Agreement:

If you would like to volunteer to participate in this study, please sign below acknowledging that you have read this consent document and voluntarily agree to participate in those portions of this study. You will receive a copy of this consent document, and your consent to participate does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress you might have as a result of participation.

Participation Consent

**I agree to participate in the research project entitled “How Do Students Enrolled in College Writing Courses Perceive the Role, Value, and Use of Instructor Feedback?” being conducted by Susan Roach. I understand that Northern Illinois University does not provide for compensation.

 Participant Printed Name

 Participant Signature

Date

Interview Consent

**I agree to participate in the interview.

 Participant Printed Name

 Participant Signature

Date

Participant Email Address (include this only if you are interested in an individual interview):

**I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview.

Participant Printed Name

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX D

ELECTRONIC SURVEY INTRODUCTION

ELECTRONIC SURVEY INTRODUCTION

Survey Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a study conducted by Susan Roach, a doctoral student in the College of Education at Northern Illinois University. The purpose of this study is to explore how college students conceptualize instructor feedback.

If you are an Elmhurst College student currently enrolled in English 106, are 18 years or older, and would like to volunteer to take the online survey, please read the informed consent information below. Note that answering the questions below indicates your consent for the survey portion of the study. If you do not wish to continue, or you are not 18 years or older, simply close your browser to end this survey.

Northern Illinois University

Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Dissertation Study

College of Education

Researcher: Susan Roach, Graduate Student

Title of Study: College Students' Conceptualization of Instructors' Written Feedback on Required First-Year Composition Course Assignments

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how college students conceptualize instructor feedback.

Duration: You may participate in one or both of the levels of the study: an online survey intended to take no longer than 5 minutes and a 45-minute private interview.

Procedures: The surveys can be taken at any time and can be accessed and completed using personal and campus computers or smart phones. Interviews will be scheduled on campus at a time convenient for you; interviews will be audio-recorded.

Risks/Discomforts: Any risks or discomforts associated with this study are minimal. You will be able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participation/non-participation in this study will have no impact on your course grade.

Benefits: No direct benefits are available for participants. However, students may develop a greater awareness of attitudes and practices in relation to feedback, perhaps using that self-

awareness to increase their success in future situations in and beyond the academic environment.

Confidentiality: Interviews will be conducted individually to ensure privacy. Once I have transcribed the recordings, the audio files will be erased within three months. None of the documents, including the interview transcripts, will contain your name or other identifying information. All research data will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office and will be destroyed after the successful completion of the dissertation or until the data has been published. Should the findings of the study be published, no one will not be identified by name.

Offer to Answer Questions: If you have any questions about study-related activities, you may email me at susan.roach@elmhurst.edu or contact my advisor, Dr. Jodi Lampi, at 815.753.8486. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at 815.753.8588.

Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this study. You may choose not to participate, or you may quit at any point without penalty.

Volunteers who participate in the online survey will be eligible for a drawing for a thank-you \$10 gift card from the Elmhurst College bookstore; those individuals who are interviewed will be eligible for a thank-you \$30 gift card from the Elmhurst College bookstore. To be eligible for the drawings, you will need to include your eNumber at the end of the online survey or after completing the interview.

Agreement:

If you are willing to volunteer to participate in this study, answering the questions below indicates your consent for the survey portion of the study. Your consent to participate does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress you might have as a result of participation.

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction to study. The purpose of this study is to explore how students enrolled in a first-year composition course describe their perceptions of written instructor feedback, its value, and its use, on academic writing assignments. The study, with its focus on the student's perspective, is intended to address a gap in research on feedback.

The value of this interview comes from your honest responses to the questions. Everything you say will be kept confidential; your name will not be attached or included in any of my materials. Also, the names of any other individuals, should you name someone for any reason, will not be included.

1. To help me understand you a bit better, tell me about your educational history: How long have you been taking classes here and what kinds of classes have you been taking? What kinds of assignments typically determine your course grades?
2. Overall, how common has it been for you to get written feedback on papers or assignments that you submit in your classes? In what kinds of classes are you most likely to get feedback?
3. What was the simile you created for the online survey? What was your reasoning? (Review this part of the survey, if student needs encouragement). Do you believe this a fair representation of your thoughts?
4. Also on the survey you were asked to identify what you believe to be the purpose of instructor feedback (show the survey questions, if student needs encouragement). In your opinion, what is the purpose of feedback, and does feedback typically “do” what you think it is intended to do? Please share with me an example (or a few examples) from your past experience that illustrates that connection, or lack of it. You may use the draft you brought with you today, if that helps.
5. What, if anything, do you usually do about or do with the feedback given to you? Walk me through the process of what typically happens when you get paper returned –
 - Where do you look first and why?
 - What do you do as you are looking at the feedback?
 - What do you do after looking at the feedback? Why?
6. If you are confused with the feedback given to, what is it that confuses you (penmanship, vocabulary, concepts, lack of direction)? If you are confused, what do you (typically) do about it?
7. Do you ever have follow-up conversations with anyone else about the feedback (your peers, tutors, instructor)? Why or why not? And (typically) what is the outcome of that?
8. Let's look at the draft you brought with you today. I'd like you to do a think aloud (explain the process and purpose of think alouds). This will help me better understand what is “going on in your head” as you look at the paper and the feedback given to you.

9. Is the draft you brought in today more or less typical of the kinds of feedback you get on your assignments? If not, how is it different?

10. Was this process and your responses more or less typical of what goes on when you get a paper? How did they differ from what you typically do? Why, do you think, they differed?

11. Overall, what value does written feedback have for you as a student, specifically how does it affect how you think and how you write? Typically, is the value of the written feedback limited to the paper at hand, or do you believe the value goes beyond that? Why?

12. I'm assuming that you have been getting feedback on papers for years. Please share with me a specific memorable experience you had in which the instructor's written feedback had a strong impact, either positive or negative, on your sense of self, your attitude, or your writing process. Explain your response.

13. What is the difference, in your opinion, between written feedback versus spoken feedback, and why? With written feedback, does it make a difference if it is handwritten or provided digitally/electronically? Of the various methods of delivery, which do you prefer, and why?

14. Is feedback, in any form, a part of your regular life (family, friends, work-related, or other areas), either because you give feedback to others or you receive it from others? Please explain. Is this kind of feedback different from the academic feedback we've been discussing? Why or why not?

15. Overall, if you could change something about how you are given feedback on an assignment, what would that be and why?

16. Is there anything else that you want to add or to clarify, or do you have any other comments you'd like to make?

Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with me. I appreciate your time and your honesty; your responses will provide valuable insights for my study.

APPENDIX F
SURVEY RESULTS

QUALTRICS SURVEY RESULTS

Q1 - Creating a simile.

Feedback is like bricks. They both are used to help support and build something.

Feedback is like a gentle push in the right direction.

I enjoy getting feedback because it helps enlighten me and show different aspects of writing

Getting feedback is like playing music in an ensemble. When something does not sound right, the director will help the player fix their mistake to make the piece sound better.

Receiving feedback feels like an affirmation that someone actually values my work enough to give their own written opinion on it. Whenever I turn in an assignment, I usually get more excited to see the feedback than the grade; especially for bigger assignments. I like to know what I have done well or what areas I need to improve on since writing is something that isn't particularly easy for me.

Getting feedback is like learning how to ride a bike. When you receive feedback it may initially make you feel bad but it is for the better, and when you learn how to ride a bike initially it may hurt because you keep falling but in the end you figure out how not to fall and are able to ride on your own.

Getting feedback is like playing the flute. Like playing the flute, you never know how well you played until someone else hears it with their perspective.

an open door. Both offer a new opportunity for those seeking it.

Feedback is like getting a shot, no one wants one, but it's not that painful and helps a lot in the long run.

Feedback is like a confiding friendship or relationship. In feedback, there are two or more parties involved, as there are two or more people in a relationship. Within the relationship, the two communicators give each other updates or advice as to how they can improve upon their patterns of communication and interaction. Like this, feedback is comparable to providing updates, advice, or opinions to the opposing party. Either way, in both situations, there needs to be communication for both 'feedback' and a 'relationship' to function properly.

Getting feedback feels like someone cares about your education that they just want to make you a stronger person.

Feedback is like eating new food. Both require you to go out of your comfort zone and try something you usually don't get to try. The results may or may not be what you expected, but in the end you learn more about what you do/ don't like.

Following the rules when you're a little kid, if you follow the rules, you get a reward. If you disobey the rules, you get a punishment. With feedback, if you do well on an assignment, you get positive feedback. If you don't do well on an assignment, you get negative feedback

Feedback is like a movie review in that you find out what you did correctly and what needs improvement.

Getting feedback is like getting a gift. Much like how a gift might come as a surprise to the receiver or it is something that the reader will definitely use in the future.

Getting feedback is like scratching the bottom of your foot on the floor. It is difficult but it is possible

Helpful

a piece of sandpaper, while one side is smooth and doesn't bother you in any way, the other side is rough and can sometimes rub you wrong. However, if you take it as the tool it is meant to be, over time it helps to smooth things out and make them more "finished".

Feedback is like a wild dog; you never know if it will be good or bad.

Feedback is like watching a dance routine playback on video. When you watch the video you realize what your strengths are and then figure out what you need to improve on.

Feedback is like reassurance. It comforts you to see someone telling you that you're doing something right. It's also disappointing when it is not provided.

Getting feedback feels like having a parent give you advice because they both involve a person of authority helping you grow.

Feedback is like a deep review because unlike any other peer edit or skim over, its purpose is to let the writer know what should be in the paper and if it is there.

Feedback is like finding a map while walking in a forest, you'll never be able to find your way out otherwise.

Getting feedback is necessary because it lets me know what I am doing right and wrong

Getting feedback is like going to the doctor. It either confirms or denies what you were thinking.

Getting feedback feels like professors are truly listening to what I had to say or what I wrote for an essay.

Getting tips

Getting feedback feels like you have it make it through 90% of what you aimed to complete.

Now that you completed most of it, you can go back and correct the parts you missed.

Feels like something I need to take in and not take for granted.

Results of Survey Questions 2-10 (Likert scale)

Survey Question	Almost always	Often	Sometimes	Very seldom
Q2: I receive written feedback from my instructor on written assignments.	15	9	4	3
Q3: My instructor takes time in class to talk about feedback.	3	11	13	4
Q4: I carefully read the feedback given to me.	20	7	4	0
Q5: I find it difficult to access feedback on electronically graded assignments.	3	5	16	7
Q6: I understand the feedback given to me.	11	18	2	0
Q7: I talk with my instructor about the feedback given to me.	4	6	13	8
Q8: The feedback given to me is helpful.	12	14	5	0
Q9: I consult the feedback from a previous paper before or as I write my next paper.	11	7	9	4
Q10: Generally speaking, I wish my instructors gave me more feedback.	6	9	13	3

Q11: What do you believe to be the purpose of written feedback? You may list as many answers as you believe are relevant.

To strengthen and fix my paper

To help you do better on the next assignment and to help you better yourself in a given subject.

It can give you more insight as to what you can do to improve your paper,

The purpose of written feedback is to understand things that can be improved and help the student write in a manner that their audience can understand.

The purpose of written feedback is to help a student learn from their mistakes in order to write a better paper in the future.

To improve your work. What you need to work on in the future. Potentially not to make the same mistake twice. Hear from different perspectives [sic] and point of views, What to add to the next project or paper.

I think that the purpose for feedback is to allow the students to understand why they received a certain grade. It also allows for the student to grasp the knowledge of ways to further improve their writing in the future.

The point of feedback is to make sure a student understands the project or assignment they worked on. Feedback is also important to grow as a student, and learn how to take constructive criticism.

I believe the purpose of a written feedback is: 1) To help you grow. 2) To make you a stronger writer. 3) To make me realize how to reword things in a better way. 4) To make me feel weird about not finding my mistake after the first time I read it.

Its [sic] simply meant to help turn a student into a better writer. If they don't [sic] know what is confusing, im [sic] the way they write, then they don't [sic] know that they have something to improve on.

To be able to improve on a previous task and/or on a future one

Improve writing for next time, help students acknowledge where they need help, allow students to see their work from someone else's viewpoint

The purpose of the feedback is to improve yourself from your previous mistakes.

The purpose of written feedback is to receive more information on how you can improve your writing

To correct us and make us better writers for future paper we may have to write

To help you learn and help you do better on the next assignment

A solid list to refer to when doing the next assignment

To let me know what I could improve on, What mistakes I should not make again, Get a different view point on the topic, Helps me to understand what is expected, Motivates me to think outside the box

To do better on the next similar assignments and to know where you need to improve in general

The purpose [sic] is to better your writing [sic] and allow for improvement.

To better yourself as a writer

To confirm or deny a students [sic] line of thinking

To fix your mistakes

the purpose of feedback should not only be to point out what is currently wrong with the paper, also to mention what can be done to help improvement or where the writer could go for help, like where in the book or online. It allows for a brief summary of what you can do better. It also allows for a student to refer back to the written feedback when doing another similar task, that allows for improvement into the future.

From my own perspective, the purpose of 'written feedback' is to provide advice, hints, or guidance, in an interpretable form for a student to comprehend efficiently

To make the writer/student aware of their areas of weakness

To draw attention to areas that you need to work on, but also to point out the areas that you are strong in, Feedback should not be all negative, and rarely do I experience it to be such.

I believe the purpose of feedback is to improve for yourself. At the end of the day the teacher can only say so much to you about your writing. It is up to us as students to take that feedback and learn from our strengths from our weaknesses. I think it is helpful to know what I am doing right on a writing assignment so for the future I know what the teacher is looking for.

The purpose of written feedback is to guide you for revisions/your next piece. Feedback tells you what you did right so you do it again, and what you did wrong so you don't repeat the same mistake.

I believe the purpose of it is for someone to pass on their knowledge to someone else for the purpose of bettering future works. It is to help you see flaws you may have not seen before, as well as encourage you to keep doing things that you are doing well.