Preparing Reflective Practitioners
The Feedback Analysis Assignment for Writing Pedagogy Education

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Abstract

This essay describes a project in which graduate students who teach college writing and are enrolled in a composition practicum for first-year graduate student instructors (GSIs) reflect on their own practice of responding to student writing. To complete the project, students first write feedback in response to one of their first-year writing students' writing projects, then (with student identifiers removed) the GSI annotates or otherwise analyzes their own feedback by answering reflection questions about their approach, what they admire about their written comments, and how they might revise their approach moving forward. This project helps writing instructors engage with assessment as reflective praxis, particularly in first-year writing contexts where instructors—in this case, GSIs—may be new to the practice of responding to student writing.

The Feedback Analysis Assignment

How do writing instructors learn to provide their students with effective feedback? Writing program administrators (WPAs) and writing pedagogy educators more broadly are tasked with preparing instructors and especially graduate student instructors (GSIs) with learning the content, pedagogies, strategies, and tools needed for teaching first-year writing. Yet there is little research specifically about effective (meta)pedagogies or practices for developing educators' effective, reflective feedback practices. As scholarship in composition and rhetoric continues to emphasize reflection as a critical tool for learning about writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Yancey, 1998; Yancey et al., 2014), so too should reflection on feedback practices be considered a critical tool for instructors learning about effective writing pedagogies. The assignment described in this essay attempts to address the need for more feedback-related reflective praxis in the composition practicum for graduate student instructors, which in turn could be used across a wider variety of writing pedagogy education (WPE) contexts.

To address the need for more reflective praxis regarding assessment, I developed an assignment I call the Feedback Analysis. Each semester I assign first-year GSIs in Minnesota State University, Mankato's first-year writing (FYW) program this written activity, for which their goal is to analyze and reflect on their practices for responding to student writing. The GSIs, all of whom teach one section of English 101: Foundations of Writing & Rhetoric concurrently as they are enrolled in the practicum course, write feedback in response to an FYW student's project, then each GSI re-reads and critically analyzes their own feedback and reflects on their own assessment practices. More specifically, GSIs reflect by answering a set of questions about how re-reading the feedback and unpacking their choices might influence their feedback practices moving forward. This project has gone through several iterations as I have taught it across classes and contexts, including not only for GSIs in composition practica, but also in a graduate Writing Assessment course. Here, I focus on what I have found to be the most successful ver-

sion of the assignment, in which the Feedback Analysis is presented as one of the GSIs' weekly discussion board assignments.[1]

GSIs[2] begin working on their Feedback Analysis project around Week 9; however, our conversations about providing feedback begin much sooner. In preparation for responding to the first set of student drafts the GSIs will receive from their FYW students, around Week 3, GSIs read and discuss Nancy Sommers' (1982) "Responding to Student Writing" and chapters 19 ("Responding to Mindful Writers") and 21 ("Peer Feedback") of Jackson's (2020) *Teaching Mindful Writers*.[3] The GSIs also practice responding to a variety of sample student texts. Since GSIs at my institution use a labor-based grading system in their first-year writing courses, we do not talk about grading in the traditional sense, nor do they practice norming. However, GSIs do participate in group work centered on writing clear feedback, giving positive comments as well as suggestions for improvement, and taking care not to overwhelm students with too many comments (Harris, 2017).[4] During the week-long summer orientation where GSIs are introduced to the content and structure of English 101, they read excerpts from *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* (Inoue, 2019) and listen to Asao B. Inoue's episode of the *Pedagogue* podcast (Wood, 2019). Because antiracist pedagogy is a core component of our FYW curriculum, GSIs also prepare for their assessment tasks by engaging in critical reading and reflection about White Language Supremacy throughout the semester. For example, GSIs read chapters from *Bad Ideas About Writing* that focus on problematizing Standard American English (Cunningham, 2017; Pattanayak, 2017) and, in one of their weekly discussion posts, they are asked to reflect on how they have reinforced or resisted habits of White language in their own writing/experience.[5]

After the GSIs get some practice giving feedback in the context of the practicum and in their own first-year writing classes, we circle back to the topic of responding to student writing through the lens of pedagogical reflection. The Feedback Analysis assignment asks GSIs to critically reflect on their response to one piece of student writing from their own FYW class. To do so, the instructor (the GSI enrolled in the composition practicum) selects one student project from their own FYW course to which they have already provided written, aural, or video feedback. The instructor may choose to focus on a student text from any stage of the student's writing process, so long as the GSI has access to their own complete response to the student's text. Once the instructor has selected a student text with the GSI's comments, the GSI composes their Feedback Analysis by first contextualizing the student project and the GSI's response, then answering reflection questions aimed at analyzing their own feedback practices. For example, the instructor might reflect on why they phrased their comments as they did, their goals for responding to the text, what they find effective about their response, and what they find ineffective or how they might change their approach to feedback moving forward. The ultimate goal of the assignment, then, is for the instructor to use critical reflection as a tool for continuing to improve their own response to student writing over time.

Exigence: History of and Motivations for the Assignment

I first designed and taught the Feedback Analysis project in Fall 2017 for a graduate course called Composition Instructors' Workshop. As I was planning to teach the course, I reflected on my own experiences of WPE and the scholarly contexts I was investigating for my related dissertation project (Dobrin, 2005; Dryer, 2012; Estrem & Reid, 2012; Pytlik & Liggett, 2002, e.g.). I realized that although I had been teaching process-oriented writing and championing pedagogical reflection for several years, I had not experienced any formal opportunities to reflect on—and therefore improve—my feedback practices. It felt important to me, then and now, that in my writing pedagogy educator role I position feedback as "dynamic genre performances" within the composition practicum (Wood, 2020) and, as with any other genre, offer GSIs more

opportunities to practice, reflect, and improve on their approach. Since I first began teaching the assignment in 2017, the project has been through several iterations across my own institutional contexts, from a public-facing formal project with multiple drafts and revisions (intended to be included in the GSIs' final Teaching Portfolio), to a weekly discussion in a graduate Writing Assessment course which was open to graduate students beyond GSIs. In all contexts, the purpose of the assignment remained for students to practice critical response to student writing by reflecting on their own feedback practices.

A host of scholarship in Composition and Rhetoric supports the reflective goals of the Feedback Analysis assignment. Babb and Corbett (2016) and Caswell (2014) call attention to the need for both individual instructors and the field more broadly to pay more attention to the affective nature of responding to, interacting with, and grading student writing. Indeed, it is still the case that most writing instructors (even those with advanced degrees in Composition and Rhetoric) do not take a required course on writing assessment or responding to student writing (Weigle, 2007), nor are we very often tasked with engaging conversations about good or effective feedback. Yet Parr and Timperley (2010) found that instructors do require pedagogical knowledge of how to give quality feedback in order to do so effectively. It is up to the instructor, in other words, to seek out professional development in this area, and perhaps it is up to WPAs to spend significant time in WPE focusing on response to student writing.

Wood (2020) more specifically suggests that writing instructors ought to critically reflect on their feedback practices within the context of labor-based grading contracts, which GSIs in my context are required to use. Instructors, he writes, "can't respond in the same ways as we used to through grading contracts because the system, and thus the values, consequences, and power relationships between teacher and student, are different" (p. 3). Instead, then, Wood argues that writing instructors who assess using labor-based grading contracts must critically reflect on how their feedback practices reinforce habits of White language, even unintentionally, and we must actively resist those habits by practicing feedback as resistant genres. In courses like the composition practicum that attempt to teach GSIs everything they need to know about writing instruction, this can seem a daunting task. I argue that the Feedback Analysis, paired with readings and reflections about antiracist pedagogy, antiracist assessment ecologies, and White Language Supremacy, could help GSIs begin the process of critical reflection Wood calls for. Importantly, GSIs will need support through contexts beyond the practicum, such as their required Composition Theory course or specific professional development opportunities, in order to continue this antiracist work.

Through the development of the Feedback Analysis assignment, I posited that reflecting on our own feedback practices at the meta-level is a worthwhile endeavor for any writing instructor (Phelps, 2000). I likewise asserted that responding to student writing is a performative aspect of writing instruction that can, and ought to be, taught (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003; Micciche et al., 2012). Moreover, critical reflection through assignments such as the Feedback Analysis in WPE contexts might provide teachers with opportunities to engage in feedback practices as resistant genres in order to more fully support antiracist assessment ecologies and pedagogies (Wood, 2020). The Feedback Analysis assignment is intended to build on these ideas by teaching writing instructors not only how to compose effective responses to student writing, but also how to critically reflect and improve on that practice over time.

Feedback Analysis Results: What Writing Instructors Learn

Though I have had the opportunity to teach the Feedback Analysis in several different contexts, the broad goal of analyzing and reflecting on one's own feedback practices has remained the same. The GSIs and other graduate students who have composed these analyses in my classes

have demonstrated some common approaches and patterns that, for me as a writing pedagogy educator, illuminate which conversations about feedback and assessment we need to spend more time on in class. Here I offer three patterns I have identified across student approaches to the Feedback Analysis—identifying their values, reflecting on disciplinary recommendations, and (re-)framing their instructor identities—and how I envision each pattern contributing to WPE. I conclude the results with my reflections on how the Feedback Analysis assignment has influenced my approach(es) to WPE. And finally, in the section that follows these results, I conclude the essay with my reflections on how the Feedback Analysis could be adapted for other classes or contexts.

The Feedback Analysis as a Tool for Identifying an Instructor's Values

One of the most profoundly simple results of assigning the Feedback Analysis, I have found, is that the assignment gives instructors the opportunity to sit and read feedback they have written, and therefore to reflect on the choices they make when responding to their students' writing. GSIs and other graduate students to whom I have assigned the Feedback Analysis regularly comment in their reflections that they had not considered, and likely would not consider, rereading their feedback had they not been asked to do so for our class. The result, then, is that the graduate students attempt to sort their feedback into patterns and then rationalize those patterns according to their own values—very likely for the first time. GSIs in the composition practicum, for example, often default to explaining how their comments fit a model we had discussed or read about in class, such as Eli Review's "describe-evaluate-suggest" model for peer response (Hart-Davidson, 2016), and/or they rely on their prior knowledge or experience as a starting point for their feedback. Many times they approach the task as if they were writing a discourse analysis. The GSI describes how their feedback demonstrates a pattern and then how that pattern exemplifies an attribute that they value in their own instruction. For example, a GSI in Fall 2020 wrote, "I couldn't help but to structure my feedback similarly to how I give feedback in my creative writing workshops. As such, I start with the positive feedback and then move to a constructive critique of the piece." Although we had read and discussed Rhetoric and Composition scholarship that recommends beginning with positive comments (Jackson, 2020; Sommers, 1982), the GSI attributed the pattern to the values of his home discipline. As I had hoped when I first designed the Feedback Analysis, I have seen the majority of graduate students use the assignment as an opportunity to critically reflect on their practices or, in this case, to rationalize[6] them, toward the ultimate goals of pedagogical reflection and improvement. Through composing the Feedback Analysis assignment, instructors are identifying and thinking about the values that inform their feedback practices, which could open the door for more conversations about where those values come from.

The Feedback Analysis as a Tool for Reflecting on Disciplinary Recommendations

Perhaps the most consistent subject I have encountered among the Feedback Analyses I have assigned is the instructors' attention to grammar and sentence-level concerns. In every context in which I have assigned the Feedback Analysis, I have assigned students to read texts about White Language Supremacy and have spent class time discussing why, in the context of antiracist pedagogy and assessment, grammar and sentence-level concerns are not a priority in our university's first-year writing context. Nevertheless, nearly every graduate student has mentioned this aspect of feedback, perhaps in part because they recognize it as content we have specifically discussed in the WPE context. GSIs and other graduate students take up this conversation in various ways. Some realize that they spend much more time/space commenting on sentence-level concerns than they thought they did, or more than they had intended. Others

see sentence-level concerns as a more important aspect of their response to student writing, and in those cases I see the discussion aspect of the Feedback Analysis assignment as an opportunity for GSIs to return to our prior conversations White Language Supremacy with the hope that they will confront their resistance upon reflection. For example, a GSI in Fall 2020 wrote in his analysis, "For this stage in their writing, my aim was (and is in most cases) twofold: to clear up any minor grammatical issues/bad habits the student might have, and to offer advice on how to make their analysis more thorough, elaborate, and intentional." The discussion board conversation that followed was one about how and when to focus on grammar when writing feedback in the context of first-year writing. This reflective writing about grammar instruction in FYW is another example of graduate students identifying feedback patterns relative to their pedagogical values. What I find significant about these conversations is the opportunity for instructors to reflect on (and perhaps improve) their choices according to disciplinary recommendations and antiracist writing assessment ecologies in particular, despite how difficult or unfamiliar those choices might be for the GSIs personally. As I reflect on what the Feedback Analysis assignment might look like in future semesters, I imagine this result will be the most positively impacted by incorporating Wood's (2020) notion of practicing feedback as resistant genres.

The Feedback Analysis as a Tool for (Re-)Framing Instructor Identities

The negotiation between an instructor's personal values and the disciplinary recommendations espoused in WPE sometimes results in a third significant phenomenon, which is that instructors realize or create identities in the process of writing and reflecting on their feedback to student writers. Across the years, almost every graduate student who has completed a Feedback Analysis has commented on something they did not realize they were doing in their feedback, either positively or negatively, that influences who they are as a writing instructor. For example, one GSI in Fall 2020 wrote "I think I skimped a bit in the department of positive feedback," and then she set a goal to provide her students with more of a balance moving forward. She did not see her instructor identity reflected in the feedback she wrote; so, as a result of re-reading her feedback and reflecting on her choices, she set a goal for the future that would better align with who she wants to be as a writing instructor. Other graduate students, such as a high school teacher enrolled in my Spring 2020 Writing Assessment course, have approached the Feedback Analysis assignment as a challenge to try a new approach. This particular teacher tried, for the first time ever, not to comment at all on grammar—and then she composed her reflection about how the task challenged her and pushed her to think differently about her purposes for responding to student writing. In her audio reflection, the graduate student said, "Since I'm considering doing this [not marking every grammatical error] in the future, I wanted to see how it would feel." In effect, she was trying on a new instructor identity based on conversations about disciplinary recommendations (i.e., antiracist writing assessment) we had had in class. Based on the experiences I have had assigning the Feedback Analysis thus far, it seems that the opportunity to sit with their own feedback and recognize responding to student writing as a series of choices rooted in their own values as well as disciplinary recommendations has a great potential to help instructors (re-)form their identities through reflection and conversation.

The Feedback Analysis as a Tool for Reimagining WPE

I developed and continue to teach the Feedback Analysis assignment because I see the benefits it has for encouraging reflective praxis, especially for developing writing instructors. I was surprised, however, by the insight the assignment gave me as a writing pedagogy educator and WPA. In seeing instructors' analyses of their own feedback practices, I have been able to

learn more about their values—the values that shape their classrooms, and therefore, much of the first-year writing program I direct. This has helped me grow as an educator and WPA by giving me insight into the content I could and should bring into not only my courses, such as the composition practicum for GSIs, but also professional development opportunities I could bring to, or develop with or for, instructors across our first-year writing program. In Fall 2020 I noticed, for example, that many GSIs were commenting more on their students' written product—the quality of the writing—than they were on the text's content. None of the GSIs picked up on this pattern themselves, but my noticing it helped me realize that I should return to the concept of teaching for transfer and our overarching goals in first-year writing, where the content is what matters most.[7] This focus, in turn, became a bigger part of the Fall 2021 composition practicum as well as professional development meetings for all first-year writing instructors at my institution. I anticipate that incorporating Wood's (2020) practice of resistant genres in future semesters will further support this effort through the lens of antiracist writing assessment ecologies.

Final Reflections: Adapting the Feedback Analysis Beyond the Composition Practicum

Though I have taught the Feedback Analysis only in graduate and WPE settings, I could see this assignment being adapted for practically any teacher education context, especially where effectively responding to student writing is an intended learning outcome. Undergraduate (or graduate) English Secondary Education students come to mind as a good fit for this project. But I think the Feedback Analysis assignment has possibilities for other contexts, too. For example, this might be a great exercise in Writing Center or other peer tutoring contexts where students are being asked to thoughtfully and/or constructively respond to their peers. Additionally, though I have not done it yet myself, I could envision a version of this Feedback Analysis being assigned in the context of any writing course, undergraduate or graduate, in order to help students think more critically about their peer responses. How fantastic would it be, perhaps in a first-year writing context, to give students time and space to reflect thoughtfully and critically about their peer feedback practices through such an assignment? The Feedback Analysis's greatest asset, in my view, is its adaptability. It can be a higher-stakes project assignment with multiple drafts, peer responses, and intended to include in a public-facing teaching portfolio. Alternately, it can be an informal exercise, meant exclusively to prompt critical thinking, reflection, and maybe some discussion. No matter how the final product is structured, students will gain a beneficial opportunity to reflect on and learn from their feedback practices.

ASSIGNMENT

Feedback Analysis Activity & Discussion

Original Discussion Post & Responses due: Week 10

By this point in the semester you've responded to (or almost finished responding to) at least one full set of student writing projects. This week and next, I'd like us to circle back to our conversations about writing assessment (week 3 and week 4) in order to do some reflective work on how you respond to your students' writing and where you want to take your assessment practices from here. So, for this activity you're going to use your response to one student project as a text for analysis and reflection. Follow the steps below to complete your feedback analysis activity.

1. Choose one student project from your own ENG 101 class this semester to use for this analysis. Choose a project that you've already responded to—it could be any stage of draft (working, revised, polished), and your response could be written comments or another mode of feedback, so long as you have the student's work and your feedback handy. Make sure to remove the student's name and any other identifying information from the project before you share it with our class.

2. Read through your feedback and take notes aimed toward reflective analysis. Some questions to consider:

   - What were your goals for the feedback at this stage of the student's writing process?
   - What's the tone of your feedback?
   - What comments do you think are particularly effective?
   - What comments might be confusing or otherwise inaccessible to the student?
   - How do you feel about the amount of feedback you provided?
   - Do you know whether the student read the feedback? Have they had an opportunity to take (or not take) your suggestions? And if so, did they incorporate your suggestions effectively?
   - What questions or concerns do you have about your feedback practices based on this experience?
   - What about your practices are you happy with?
   - How do you intend to build on, continue, or change your feedback practices based on this reflective analysis?

3. Use your notes to compose a brief reflective analysis to share with the class. In your discussion post, I'd like you to share the original text (the feedback you wrote to the student) + your analysis, in any mode. You could compose written text, an audio reflection, a video, or (my personal favorite) a screen recording of you going through your feedback. Again, please make sure to remove the student's name and any identifying information from their project before sharing it with us. It will also be helpful for us if you take a sentence or two to set up the context of the project: what stage of the drafting process was this, what was the assignment, and what were your goals for that particular writer and assignment?

4. Browse your classmates' analyses and engage in conversation with at least two people. What practices, goals, questions, or concerns do you have in common? How does seeing other people's feedback influence your own ideas? As or if you find it useful, I encourage you include any insights from Jackson's *Teaching Mindful Writers* in your discussion. To what extent does Jackson's emphasis on reflection (Part V) and mindful teaching (Part VI) influence your assessment practices? (Citing Jackson is not required—just an idea if you're seeing connections and wanting to bring in the reading.)

We'll take two weeks on this praxis discussion since the work is a little more involved than just responding to a reading. As always, I'll be on email and at my Zoom office hours if you have questions.

Notes

[1]Each week in the composition practicum course, GSIs write a Teaching Journal discussion post in which they respond to a prompt or set of prompts related to that week's content. Each week's prompt asks the GSIs to engage with the assigned reading for the practicum as well as their own teaching of English 101.

[2]GSIs at MNSU Mankato are often, though not always, novice instructors. Most of them have never taught in a formal education context and almost all have never been a first-year writing instructor. Moreover, the GSIs range in disciplinary backgrounds, with MFA in Creative Writing and MA TESOL having the largest representation. Therefore, the majority of GSIs have little to no formal knowledge of composition theory or pedagogy prior to enrolling in the composition practicum.

[3]When the FYW curriculum calls for students to compose multimodal texts early on, which it usually does, the GSIs spend another week reading about and discussing response to multimodal assignments. Usually I assign Yancey's (2004) "Made Not Only in Words" and an "Assessing Student Multimodal Work" webpage from Kent State University (Department of English, n.d.).

[4]In future semesters, I plan to assign GSIs to read Shane Wood's (2020) "Engaging in Resistant Genres as Antiracist Teacher Response," which was not yet published during the semesters I reference in this article.

[5]At MNSU Mankato, the composition practicum is the first course GSIs take in writing pedagogy. GSIs learn about teaching writing concurrently as they are teaching their first FYW course. All GSIs are required, however, to take a graduate course in Composition Theory prior to the final year of their teaching assistantship. The Composition Theory course builds on these conversations about antiracist pedagogy and assessment and White Language Supremacy.

[6]I see this GSI's description of his approach to feedback as rationalization of his choices. While he could have aligned his choices with the assigned reading from the composition practicum, he chose instead to focus on what he already knew from creative writing workshops. Further research into this topic could address how GSIs' prior knowledge influences their feedback practices. For writing pedagogy educators, such an instance could be an opportunity to engage instructors in conversations about their values and where those values come from, especially in order to emphasize connections to composition scholarship on writing assessment and feedback.

[7]For a bit of added institutional context, GSIs in MNSU's first-year writing program teach a common curriculum designed to focus on teaching for transfer (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Yancey et al., 2014), multimodality, and antiracism. For more information about our program's curriculum, see Moreland, Henderson Lee, & Cole (2023).

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v7i2.137.

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