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RECONCEPTUALIZING RESPONSE TO WRITING FROM A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE: WRITING DEVELOPMENT AND DIALOGIC INTERACTION

CREDEFINIENDO LA RETROALIMENTACION DE LA ESCRITURA, DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA LONGITUDINAL: DESARROLLO DE LA ESCRITURA E INTERACCIÓN DIALÓGICA

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Abstract

Given the amount of time writing instructors spend in providing feedback on writing, researchers have sought to understand many dimensions of feedback, especially the practices that best support student writing development. A number of researchers have sought to understand student perspectives on response to writing, and this study builds on that work by examining student perceptions of responses to writing from a longitudinal perspective. This interview-based study draws on data from college students who were interviewed once each year for five years (four years of undergraduate education and a fifth year in graduate school or the workplace). Conducted at a major private university in the United States, this article draws its data from a five-year longitudinal study of 189 college students (a random sample of 12% of the incoming freshman class) that collected student's writing in and out of class, and included semi-structured interviews with a subgroup of 39 students once each year during the five-year period. The interviews focused on the students' writing lives and investigated many aspects of their writing experience both in and out of school. This article presents an analysis of their perceptions of factors that contributed to their development as writers, especially feedback, as the initial coding of the interview data showed that feedback was by far the most influential contributor to student's writing development. Further analysis of the interviews focused on understanding the who, what, when, where, why, and how of feedback, that is, the analysis sought at a fine-grained level to understand the ways and degree to which feedback contributed to student's growth as writers. Elements of theories of dialogism and dialectic were particularly useful in highlighting the features of effective responses to writing; specifically, the idea that the most impactful forms of feedback took place when there were frequent and ongoing dialogues between a writer and a responder with a particular set of characteristics. These types of conversations were particularly impactful when conducted with peers outside of classroom settings. Results suggest that future researchers on feedback should look beyond individual instances of feedback to ongoing chains of communication, and to seek to understand the ways in which writers integrate feedback into their writing practices. Results also showed that feedback from peers outside of classroom settings were highly influential on students' sense of their own writing development. Implications for research and teaching are discussed. Specifically, it is suggested that teachers and those responsible for writing pedagogy are encouraged to consider ways in which they can facilitate multiple, ongoing streams of high-quality feedback for their students, and to prioritize these conversations in their instructional practice and writing pedagogies.

Keywords: language instruction, writing, learning processes, feedback, literacy methods.

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Resumen

Un estudio longitudinal de la escritura incluyó entrevistas semiestructuradas una vez al año durante un período de cinco años con 39 estudiantes. El análisis de las entrevistas mostró que la retroalimentación era, con mucho, el factor que más influía en el desarrollo de la escritura de los estudiantes. El análisis posterior se centró en comprender la naturaleza de la retroalimentación que contribuyó al crecimiento de los estudiantes como escritores. Los resultados mostraron que las respuestas más impactantes a la escritura se producían cuando quienes proporcionaban la retroalimentación poseían características específicas y participaban en conversaciones continuas y abiertas. Los resultados también mostraron que los comentarios de los compañeros fuera del aula influían mucho en la percepción que tenían los estudiantes de su propio desarrollo como escritores. Se discuten las implicaciones para la investigación y la enseñanza.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de idiomas, escritura, procesos de aprendizaje, retroalimentación, métodos de alfabetización.

1.Introduction

One of the most important methods of supporting the development of writing abilities is through the giving of formative feedback (Biber, 2011); and, indeed, historically, many instructors spend a great deal of their instructional time providing feedback to their writing students (Sommers, 1982). Although institutional requirements to provide grades drive much of this activity, teachers also prioritize feedback because of its role in the development of student writing abilities. Most pedagogical approaches to composition find a critical point of praxis in the responses that teachers and others provide to developing writers. This material point of interaction between readers, writers, and texts has provided a valuable site for writing research the bulk of which has centered on a search for effective and efficient teaching practices that support student writing development (Underwood y Tregidgo, 2006).

In higher education, studies of the role of teacher response to student writing and its impact on learning have focused on many areas for L1 and L2 writers (Ferris, 2003): the impact of written comments of teachers on the revision of student texts (Dysthe et al, 2007; Straub y Lunsford, 1995; Connors y Lunsford, 1993; Anson, 1989); the efficacy of corrective feedback for L2 students (Li y Vuono, 2019); automated online feedback systems (Link et al, 2022); peer-to-peer feedback (Huisman, et al, 2019; Patchan et al, 2009; Nystrand y Brandt, 1989); and, the impact of teacher response on second language learners (Ferris, 1997a; Ferris et al, 1997b). For many years, researchers have also given serious attention to students' perspectives on response (Gere, 2019; Cho et al, 2006; Fife y O'Neill, 2001; Murphy, 2000; Phelps, 2000; Prior, 1991, 1995; Sommers y Saltz, 2004). These studies expanded the scope of response research by making more visible the many "institutional, interpersonal, and personal" (Prior, 1995) contexts in which response occurs, and the ways response and feedback in a variety of modalities is taken up and engaged with by writers over the course of their development (Carless, 2020; Tian y Zhou, 2020).

Based on a five-year study of writers at Stanford University, the research presented in this article seeks to contribute to a reconceptualization of feedback and response by situating response within a longitudinal framework (across texts, courses, and time), and emphasizing the learner's perspective more than instructional practices. Drawing on previous longitudinal studies of the writing of college students (Rogers, 2010), and theoretical perspectives of dialectic and dialogism (Spinuzzi, 2023; Riegel,1979; Bahktin, 1986), I argue that by paying more attention to ongoing chains of communication and their influence on individual writing development teachers and researchers can attend more closely to the elements of feedback and response that are most salient for student learning.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Longitudinal Studies of Writing in Higher Education

While notions of writing development differ greatly (Applebee, 2000), and should be considered as situated social constructs (Matusov et al., 2007), previous longitudinal studies of writing in higher education (Haswell, 1991, 2000; Sternglass, 1997; Carroll, 2002; 2004; Herrington y Curtis, 2000; Spack, 1997; Chiseri-Strater 1991; Beaufort 2004, 2007; McCarthy, 1987; Haas, 1994, Gere, 2019) have described in some detail the ways particular college students at specific institutions have changed as writers throughout their college years (Rogers, 2010). These studies have differed in many respects (research questions, methods, theoretical frameworks, sample populations, length of studies, etc.) and have not provided direct causal arguments for learning. However, taken together, they present a complex view of the factors that contribute to the development of students' writing abilities (Rogers, 2008). Notably, while these studies show that extracurricular factors (psychological factors, socio-economic conditions, quality of prior instruction, home literacy environments, etc.) exert considerable influence on students' writing lives, they also show that interactions in the college classroom play a central role in the ways student writing develops.

In addition to identifying the multiple influences on writing development, prior longitudinal writing research has demonstrated convincingly that writing development in higher education is both multi-dimensional and non-linear (Sternglass, 1997), that is, the different knowledge domains that contribute to writing performance (Beaufort, 2004, 2007) develop at different rates for different individuals. This research also demonstrates the complexity associated with writing development given the length of time and amount of deliberate practice that it takes to go from early literacy to advanced writing in professional contexts (Kellogg, 2008).

2. Methods

The research reported on this article is drawn from the Stanford Study of Writing (SSW), a five-year longitudinal study (Lunsford et al., 2008). The SSW examined the writing practices, texts, and development of a random sample of 12% of Stanford's incoming class of 2001 (n=189). Researchers followed study participants through their undergraduate years and into their first year beyond college. The study provided a rich data set to investigate writing development, and included yearly surveys of all participants, the collection of students in and out of class writing (n=14,776) and an interview sub-group (n=39) that was drawn from the overall sample. Each member of this group was interviewed once each year (with some exceptions), yielding a total of 144 interviews.

Interviews for the SSW were conducted by a small team of interviewers consisting of faculty members and graduate students. Interviews were based on written protocols and were digitally recorded. The interviewers did not read questions verbatim to each student; instead, they engaged in conversations

with the students with varying degrees of fidelity to the original interview protocols. The interviews included exploratory and follow up questions, probes, and checking with respondents to clarify answers. Transcripts of these interviews were carefully prepared.

The SSW interview questions focused almost entirely on the students' writing, both academic and extracurricular. They provided introspective and retrospective yearly accounts of study participants' writing related experiences at Stanford. In the interviews students provided rich descriptions of the ways writing intertwined with their overall development and life experiences, including the complex interrelationships of their educational experiences at Stanford with their lives outside of school, individual backgrounds, and larger societal changes.

Each year study participants were asked questions concerning the amount and types of writing they had been doing, their writing processes, their definitions of good writing, the amount of collaborative and multi-modal writing they were involved with, and their perspectives on intellectual property. These repeated questions provided opportunities to view changes in student attitudes, values, and beliefs over time. Unique questions were also asked each year. For example, in the first year of interviews students were asked about their required first year composition courses, and about their high school writing experiences. In subsequent years students were asked about their Writing in the Major (WIM) courses, and other discipline specific writing experiences as well as topics related to happenings at Stanford. In the fifth-year study participants were asked to reflect back on their undergraduate years to share final reflections and offer suggestions for improvements to the writing curriculum at Stanford.

These interviews offered a particularly appropriate method for exploring learning longitudinally, as Brenner (2006) notes: "one of the ways in which changes over time can be documented is through an exploration of the accounts by which members of a culture construe the significance and nature of educational practices" (p. 132). Other qualitative and mixed methods longitudinal research studies have also paid a great deal of attention to the student's (i.e., the writer's) point of view through a reliance on research interviewing. Indeed, longitudinal writing researchers have consistently noted the high value of interview data for understanding students' points of view of their writing activities (e.g., Spack,1997; Beaufort, 2004; Haas, 1994).

Interview Analysis and Coding

The 150 interview transcripts were coded in a top-down fashion using a rubric of factors (see Table 1) considered important to writing development (what might be called micro-sponsors of literacy) which were derived from previous longitudinal studies of writing in higher education (Rogers, 2010). Transcripts were also coded from the bottom-up by allowing categories to emerge through reading and analysis.

Table 1

Factors Influencing Writing Development (Rogers, 2010)

Classroom Discourse	*Non-classroom Related Factors*
▪ What teachers say about writing in the classroom, including direct instruction ▪ Peer to peer talk—reading and writing groups ▪ Whole class discussion ▪ Conversation with teachers	▪ Student's lives outside of school ▪ Psychological factors such as self-esteem, confidence, or anxiety ▪ Time - natural development and maturity ▪ Preexisting abilities and writing experiences ▪ Cultural backgrounds ▪ Gender ▪ Student engagement ▪ Institutional context, including assessment regimes ▪ Mentoring (in extra-curricular settings)
Classroom Genres	*Teacher Behaviors*
▪ Teacher written response to writing ▪ Model texts ▪ Access to other student texts ▪ Reading ▪ General instructional supports: handouts, graphic organizers, assignments, and rubrics ▪ Increased domain knowledge	▪ Teacher expectations ▪ Responsive teacher attitude in relation to feedback ▪ Immediate rhetorical context, especially grades ▪ Time to draft, revise, and reflect ▪ Mentoring (by teachers) ▪ Repeat performance opportunities, i.e. practice ▪ Nature of tasks ▪ Teacher supportiveness and accessibility outside class

Transcripts were systematically coded at the word level for references to factors that contributed to development (drawn from Table 1) and for words like "learned", "helped", or "grew" as indicators of student's sense of an increase in some aspect of their writing ability. For example, "I am *learning to look and how to ask for feedback*, which is *helping me to grow as a writer*."

During the initial analysis of the interview data, the overwhelming volume of student comments that connected feedback to growth in writing shifted the focus from the larger group of codes to a singular focus on feedback and response to writing. For students repeatedly brought up (on many occasions in ways not directly related to the questions they were asked) the importance of different kinds of personalized input on their writing, i.e., feedback. Indeed, thirty-six of the thirty-nine interview subjects discussed the importance and role of feedback in one or more of their interviews; and, in 74 out of the 144 interviews that took place (51%) students discussed at least one of following codes as having an influence on their writing:

- responsive teacher attitude in relation to feedback
- conversation with teachers
- mentoring by teachers
- teacher written response to writing

In addition to these codes, a new code, *student's conversations with their peers outside of class* emerged as a surprising yet important contributor to students' sense of their own writing development. This code in particular shifted, in meaningful ways, the focus away the giving of feedback by instructors towards the interactions and contexts surrounding the take up of feedback and on the nature of the feedback more generally.

Following initial insights into the importance of feedback to the study participants, all of the interviews were reanalyzed with a singular focus on feedback and response. At the same time I began drawing on aspects of the theoretical frameworks of dialectics (Riegel, 1979), and Bakhtin's (1986) work on dialogism (see Spinuzzi, 2023 for an overview of dialogics and dialectics in rhetorical genre studies). I found especially useful Bakhtin's framing of the *utterance* as a central unit of speech communication as a way of understanding in greater detail the nature of feedback and response. While in no way is this application of Bakhtin comprehensive or reflective of his overall theory, there were three discrete elements of Bakhtin's perspective on the utterance that were relevant in considering feedback on student writing:

- a change of speaking subjects
- finalization
- addressivity

First, a change of speaking subjects implies a clear distinction between the turns that interlocutors take (p. 71); further, from Bakhtin's perspective, each turn taken *must include the possibility of a response*. Second, an utterance is finalized when each speaker has said (or written) everything he or she wished to say in a particular situation. Addressivity (p. 95), a third feature of the utterance, refers

to the quality of being directed to a specific audience or individual. In the context of responding to writing, the quality of addressivity implies that in addition to comments being directed towards an entire group, responses can be "differentiated, personalized, and individuated" (Phelps, 2000, p. 95). Using the three elements of the utterance as a tool for analyzing what students said about the feedback they received proved useful because rather than focusing on individual instances of feedback, or even on a particular modality of feedback (oral, written, video, etc.), the analysis shifted to the ways in which writers are exposed to many kinds of feedback over time and the links between turns taken in conversations about writing across multiple interactions.

Aspects of Riegel's (1979) work on dialectic helped to highlight the ways in which writers and teachers seek to "synchronize and coordinate" their activity with each other. From the perspective of dialectics language acquisition takes place primarily through ongoing chains of communication that are purposefully aimed at appropriate social performance and in which interactions of the interlocuters influence each other recursively. Classic examples of these chains of communication that contribute to language development are mother-child verbal exchanges that occur during the child's acquisition of language. Bruner (1983) noted that in their language-based interactions with their children "parents spoke at the level where their children could comprehend them and moved ahead with remarkable sensitivity to their child's progress" (p. 38). Bruner called this phenomenon "fine tuning". According to Bruner, the primary way for mothers to fine tune was to engage in ongoing dialogues, which allowed children to learn "how to extend the speech they have into new contexts, how to meet the conditions of different speech acts, how to maintain topics across turns, and how to know what's worth talking about—how indeed to regulate language use" (p. 39). Speech acquisition, of course, differs in many ways from learning to write (e.g., children everywhere acquire speech from their environments, while learning to write requires explicit instruction); however, in both writing and speaking "language learning depends on response from others" (Freedman y Sperling, 1985, p. 2).

3. Results

To report the results of the analysis of the interviews, I used a series of basic questions (who, what, when, why, and how) to categorize what students said about the feedback they received and the impact of that feedback on their sense of their own writing development:

- Why refers to conditions that gave rise to student's receiving feedback
- Who refers to the roles and qualities of those providing feedback to the writers
- What refers to the content and tone (praise, criticism, etc.) of feedback
- When refers to the timing and frequency of the interactions
- How refers to the methods used to facilitate the interactions

Within each of these overarching categories I attend to elements of the utterance as noted above and their role in student experiences of feedback and response to their writing.

Why: What Motivates the Giving of Response?

SSW study participants described receiving valuable input on their writing in a variety of situations: when instructors structured required conferences and peer review into their courses; when students responded to invitations from teachers to submit multiple drafts; and, when students sought out input from professors, teaching assistants, the University Writing Center, and peers outside of class. Clear differences emerged when students discussed the dynamics of these different occasions--structured (school-sponsored) or sought out (self-sponsored), and these distinctions help point towards ways of improving structured activities and assisting students in proactively seeking out responses to their writing.

Early in their undergraduate experience, most study participants experienced required writing conferences with teachers in first year composition courses in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR).

> Int: How would you like instructors to improve their writing instruction?
>
> 1st Year Electrical Engineering Major: For someone like me, I think my PWR (Stanford's required first year writing course) teacher was the biggest help, because *she had required consultations* which, for someone like me, benefits a lot. Because all my other professors were very available for consultations, but I just never went, and *I think the required ones really helped*.

Teacher availability in office hours was not enough. As a first year double major in Communication and Comparative Studies in Race y Ethnicity student also described: "I didn't get too much feedback unless the professor required it, [but] for the research papers sometimes *he required us to come and talk to him.*" To a lesser degree students had required conferences with teachers in their Writing in the Major (WIM), and selected other courses. For many study participants, without these structured opportunities, they would have received little if any personalized feedback on their writing beyond a grade.

Several first-year students reported that meeting with teachers one-on-one was unique to their college experience, which offers an explanation as to why these required conferences stood out to first year students. As a first year Mechanical Engineering major said when asked if he "ever [thought] of going to talk with the person that gave you the prompt, for clarification?"

> I did that in the later quarters because I realized how important that was. I'd never done that in high school; so, I wasn't used to being able to do that. And so, *I just did it on my own*. But I realize now that that is huge. Before you even get started if you make sure that your

> thinking is in a good direction or one that your TA feels is meaningful, you're going to have a good paper. It just makes sense.

Structured Opportunities: In-class peer review

Students participated in peer review sessions in their required first year writing courses and required Writing in the Major courses; although, study participants did report that some other courses (e.g., poetry, human biology, and foreign language classes) included peer review. Like student-teacher writing conferences, not all study participants participated in peer review in high school. Structuring peer review into courses helped these students for whom in-class peer review sessions was a new experience, as this first year English and Linguistics major noted: "I'm learning that students here are capable of revising others' papers, while in high school I wasn't really in an environment like that. I was the one who had to correct other people's papers". Overall, these activities received mixed responses from students, who described several factors that diminished the effectiveness of peer review, in particular low levels of reader investment and the difficulty of producing quality feedback in a short period of time.

> Usually, you ended up getting a 400-word piece of trash just so they could hand something to you. They're like, "blank blank blank, I'll write something there," and so you don't really get to read them. I always wrote the paper a week early, so it was done, but I thought the comments on it were pretty [poor]– because it takes you a lot of time to do a really good revision I think, especially on a longer paper.

A common thread in the study participants' experience was the value of teachers providing clear guidelines for peer-review activities, as this first-year student noted when asked if peer review was useful: "Yeah, I think so, *when it's structured with peer review forms or a list of questions*". Or, as another first year Biology and History major described: "If there are clear guidelines, and the teacher presented it in a serious manner, then there's going to be a different response". Students also described peer review assignments that were graded and assessed, which contributed to higher levels of student investment in peer response.

Another effective pedagogical practice related to peer review which addressed the problem of time constraints was identified by a first-year mechanical engineering student: "Early on in the writing we would just break down one paragraph … we picked our longest paragraph, which is a pretty good place to start, and we would just try to straighten it out. That was my favorite part." In another case, the teacher asked students to respond in depth by writing a four-page written response to a peer's paper, rather than responding to multiple drafts in shallower ways. Other students also reported taking papers home and providing comments, which provided additional time for crafting responses. These

kinds of activities rescued peer review from its potential pitfalls, and increased the opportunity for writers to receive meaningful feedback.

Student Initiated Conversations about Writing with Teachers

Along with required conferences, students took proactive steps to engage in conversations about their writing. From the study participants' point of view, these interactions played an important role in their growth as writers.

> Int: What kind of support have you gotten from your instructors the writing requirement?
>
> 1st year Human Biology major: I feel like people…I mean, some professors give you responses no matter what, and other professors *you have to elicit harsher criticism if you want it from them*. Or at least a different dimension of criticism, like, sometimes I'll get someone who will just evaluate the argument I'm making, and I'll say like, 'Could you point out more specifically where it falls through, or what maybe the problem with the rhetoric there was, or that kinda thing.' You kinda have to ask them to tailor it to what you're looking for sometimes. Because generally if they're making an evaluation of an argument it's going to be a lot less, at least in my experience, they're going to make a lot fewer comments, and they're just going to be like, 'I would counter-argue here that blank,' instead of saying how you could strengthen your argument. But I do get a significant amount of feedback from mine 'cause I usually ask them to. After the first time they grade something, I'll say like, "Oh, don't worry about hurting my feelings. If you could really attack my paper, I would appreciate it if you really would." And then usually by the second draft they'll give me a lot. But I would say there is variation in terms of, if a professor thinks that a student is sensitive, they're not going to give as much, which I wouldn't necessarily say is a good thing. I mean, in a way, tact is good, in another way, I think it helps a lot of students to just get hit in the face with it.

As the student above noted, sometimes it took a great deal of persistence to engage in a satisfying and high-quality conversations with faculty members. As another student remarked: "I realized that teaching fellows (TF) don't want to read bad papers, and that like they want to read good papers, so that if you know, go and like *keep hounding them*, then they'll totally be very helpful".

Over time and through experience, some students discovered that significant improvements in writing came from these conversations with their teachers, as both a second year and fifth year study participant described:

> Int: Anything you learned in your first year that you applied to your second year?
>
> 2nd year Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity and Communication double major: There were positive and negative experiences with writing freshman year… But this year I am getting a lot of feedback, and *I am learning to look and how to ask for feedback, which is helping me to grow as a writer.*

Student Initiated Conversations about Writing with Peers

Although study participants reported seeking assistance from significant others, family, and friends, Stanford peers were clearly the most important non-faculty providers of feedback. Moreover, student-initiated peer-to-peer interactions outside of class frequently stood out in interviews as the most significant contributors to student's sense of their own writing development. The study participant's descriptions of the personalization, open-endedness, and turn taking that took place in talking to peers about their writing shed a great deal of light on the contributions of feedback to writing development. As a 4th year Chemistry major described when asked, "Do you think your process has changed in any way since the first year?"

> I turned it out [my] application essay for STEP [Stanford Teacher Education Program], you know, very quickly and I read it and I was like "I really like this." And it was even better because I sent it to my best friend who's at the University of Maryland and she is...she's the managing editor at the school newspaper and she reads a lot of stuff and she really liked it. And it was kind of disheartening because she sent it back with a lot of marks on it but what she told me was that as ... when you're on a newspaper you mark up stuff that's really good because you know it could be great, as opposed to stuff that's barely passable, there's not much stuff that's worth salvaging, you know. And we hashed that out, we talked about "well, I want this, I don't want that" and you know so on and so forth. And I was really happy with that essay. So I guess that was...*I guess that might be kind of a turning point in my college writing because that's when I found...I discovered, you know, more about how I write, what makes me write more successfuly*.

Peers were valued for their intelligence and engagement, and their close physical proximity (approximately 54% of the undergraduate population live on the Stanford campus), which played a

significant role in understanding why informal conversations initiated by students stood out as a contributing factor to student writing development as a first-year economics major reported.

> Int: Do you do any informal peer review, like are there people that you show your papers to?
>
> 1st Year Economics Major: Yeah. *What the people do in the dorms is, maybe, on some level, more significant than, like, what one instructor achieves on their own, because they just put in so much time*.

Another key contributor to the value of peer interactions was the high degree of personalization. As a 2nd year Human Biology major put it: "It was helpful to have personal feedback, *especially for people who knew my writing*". Study participants described a number of specific elements associated with personalization, including trust, ongoing personal relationships, and peer's knowledge of the writer's writing strengths and weaknesses as playing a part in the value of these interactions. As a 2nd year Human Biology major described: "My roommate and I were really good at reading each other's work; we knew each other, knew the pitfalls we fell into, and became a really supportive environment, since we weren't offended by what the other person was going to say."

Several students who grew in their sense of the value peers could add to their learning as they progressed throughout their undergraduate years. Study participants described learning from each other in dialogue, as a 2nd Year Psychology Major reported: "I think my best learning is done when I'm really engaged and that's often with my friends."

Learning to Write through Reading and Response

Not only did writers grow through receiving responses, but students also reported that they grew as writers by acting as providers of feedback to other student writers. Study participants reported this happened informally and during in-class peer review, while others worked as paid tutors in the residence halls or the Hume Writing Center. Reading and conversing provided another opportunity for students to reflect on their own writing and ideas, and a number of students reported that in reading the writing of others with the purpose of providing feedback they grew in their ability to differentiate aspects of their own writing, and in particular diagnosing writing errors. A writing tutor described it this way:

> [As a tutor] I finally got a chance to look at other people's writing and that's allowed me to place my writing in a sort of dialogue with other people's writing, with other students' writing, which enabled me to make the jump which I hadn't made yet. Being able to read through other people's work also makes you more aware of how you can make writing that's more clear and understandable by your readers, because

> by me correcting some of the mistakes in their work, it made me more aware of what I was typing or writing in my own work.

Response and The Stanford Writing Center

Like many university writing centers, the Hume Writing Center at Stanford offers individual meetings with trained writing consultants, as well as workshops on a variety of important topics related to writing. Of the thirty-nine students in the SSW interview sub-group seventeen (44%) reported using the Writing Center at some point in their undergraduate career; they reported using it more in their early college experience than their later years: 11 in their freshman year, 7 sophomore, 4 junior, and 3 senior (these numbers include students who used the center across multiple years). As tutors could not be subject matter experts in all domains, students said tutor comments only helped in a limited range of areas, other students said that at times they encountered a lack of coordination and synchronization between input from writing tutors and teacher expectations, which may explain why Writing Center use declined as students progressed in their major areas of study.

What students said they valued most from the Writing Center was the opportunity to receive “informed” responses from “interactive” readers across a wide range of genres (including academic writing, statements of purposes and personal statements, grant proposals, fellowship applications, and resumes), and at different stages of the writing process (including talking out ideas and topic selection, working on structure, organization, grammar, and mechanics). While the Writing Center overall provided task specific assistance, rather than ongoing support, some students experienced a more interactive quality of support when they visited tutors more than once, or when they received assistance from their PWR instructors who at times staffed the Writing Center. A few study participants noted that the Writing Center was an important part of their writing process and a place where they brought the majority of their writing assignments.

Who: The Qualities of Effective Responders to Writing

Regardless of the occasion that gave rise to student experiences with response, study participants indicated that they found value in writing-related interactions with a wide variety of readers. As one student said succinctly, “it doesn’t have to be the professor.” Students reported receiving valuable feedback from professors, teaching fellows (graduate teaching assistants who serve as instructors), major advisors, departmental tutors, residential tutors, tutors in the writing center, research colleagues (principal investigators and post-docs), workplace mentors, peers, classmates, friends at other institutions, and family members. Rather than simply the position of an individual responder, it was the qualities of the person giving the feedback and the relationship of the writer with the person giving the feedback that impacted the value of the interactions on their writing (Patchan and Schunn, 2016) not the responder’s position that influenced student’s perceptions of the helpfulness of these

interactions. In student interviews, several key qualities emerged that appeared to contribute most significantly to the effectiveness of these interactions:

- expert knowledge of subject matter
- expert knowledge of genre requirements
- a high level of interest and engagement on the part of the responder
- accessibility, availability, and supportiveness
- knowledge of the individual student's writing strengths and weaknesses
- continuity of interaction over several writing tasks
- responders' ability to give good comments, oral and written
- a willingness to work through multiple drafts of the same paper
- candor and trust (see also O'Neill y Fife, 1999 p. 196)
- respect for the reader's writing ability

What: The Content of Writing Feedback

Study participants reported that the substance of their conversations with teachers and other readers centered more on written tasks and products than the processes by which these tasks were accomplished. When providing comments on written products three areas received the most consistent attention: content and ideas; structure and organization; mechanics and conventions. In most student accounts, the distinctions between feedback related to ideas, structure, and conventions appeared in very clear patterns. Overall, students reported that feedback related to ideas and content dominated both general education and discipline specific courses, as one student noted, "You talk about the topics that you're going to be writing about, but you don't talk about the papers, per se". Several students expressed dissatisfaction at not receiving enough attention to issues of style, syntax, and structure.

As a Human Biology Major reported: "A lot of times you can go to the office hours of the Teaching Fellow, and they don't look at drafts but they'll discuss ideas, which is sometimes frustrating." Likewise, a Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity Major also reported, "They [teachers] comment on the writing, we have paper conferences, but so far, I feel like they haven't really commented on the actual writing, more the ideas that I've presented. So, I guess I kind of felt like that was lacking, that they could have been more critical of my writing."

Students welcomed feedback from readers related to content, structure, and conventions, although at particular times students perceived a mismatch between the comments they needed and what they received. But, regardless of the focus of the interaction, students reported that ongoing conversations provided the best mechanism for covering a wide variety of content areas. Notably, it was only in ongoing conversations that students reported receiving input on their writing processes.

> Int: How helpful or how involved was your advisor in this process? Did he help you in the writing process? Did he write collaboratively at all with you? How did this work?
> 4th Year Psychology Major: I worked primarily on this project with a woman who's a post-doc in our lab. He [the major advisor] approved all of the ideas, but I was working most intensively with her. She was enormously helpful as far as guiding me structurally—how to structure the paper, how to approach psychological writing. She gave me websites to access. I wrote the first draft. I brought it back. I thought it was good, and she didn't really think it was that good. So, I had to readdress my writing style. She was really helpful in revisions. I had a lot of help in it, but I did the writing myself.

On the other hand, even high degrees of turn-taking between reader and writers were no guarantee that a writer would receive input in the areas they thought they needed or desired. In Bakhtin's terms the writer's utterances were not always finalized (i.e., the writer had not said everything she had to say), as the following account from the same Psychology and Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CSRE) graduate student described in her fifth year:

> "Every CSRE senior writes either a research paper or a thesis. And that was an amazing experience and definitely gave me a lot of confidence as a writer. So, I had an academic advisor, or thesis advisor, who was really guiding me in terms of what my research was and how I did it and the writing process, analyzing everything. And then there was a CSRE advisor who was in charge of the thesis class, and she was there for support. She read my thesis and gave me feedback on it. In the early stages, like on my first draft, my advisor read a couple of drafts and then I also submitted it to the undergraduate research editor person who edits honors theses? And with all of them…so I felt like the CSRE person really commented on the ideas. My advisor wasn't very critical; he was really supportive and he had also talked to me about a lot of the ideas, so he kind of knew what was coming. But, so, I was looking for more feedback on the writing, like I really wanted it to be a really polished piece, so I took it to the undergraduate research editor guy and asked him to read it, and he basically just commented on formatting and punctuation. And I was like, 'Okay, well, there's…' like I wanted

> something between, like someone who would say 'Could you express this idea more clearly?' or 'What are you trying to say?' And I couldn't find that anywhere. So that was really frustrating in terms of, like, there were all these support people for the thesis writing process, but none of them were there to help the writing be better.

Clearly the student received a great deal of highly personalized input on her writing across multiple rounds of response; yet, she was unable to get the input she wanted, "…*none of them were there to help the writing be better.*" Her experience points to the necessity of open-ended conversations in coordinating problem identification and solving between a writer and a responder.

While the most valuable feedback was tightly focused on the individual's writing performance and ideas, students repeatedly described their struggles in synchronizing interactions with their instructors.

> Int: Following up on the changes in the process of writing and some of the new genres – so, for example, the lesson plans. How are you figuring it out? Is it something that you're finding you're having to figure out on your own, or are you getting explicit feedback from your instructors?
>
> 5th year Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity graduate: Most of the instructors don't give explicit feedback on the writing; they just comment on the ideas, and are just really supportive of us developing our thinking on education.

The student's words here show the centrality of coordination and synchronization, as well as the complexity of carrying on extended conversations with faculty members concerning writing. Simply receiving *more* feedback is not the issue. Optimal conditions for the giving and receiving of effective feedback involve the coming together of informed, open-ended conversations that take account of multiple dimensions of a text, and which also include the writer's perspective on the task and situation at hand.

What: The Tone of Feedback and Its Impact on Writers

As the SSW did not capture teacher comments on papers, nor record conversations between writers and readers, this self-report data represents only the student's memories, perceptions, and interpretations of the kinds of responses they received. While feedback types can be differentiated across a number of dimensions (e.g., Shute, 2008, p. 160), study participants described in broad strokes and with some consistency the tenor of the responses they received in four major categories: no feedback or extremely minimal feedback; positive; negative; and constructive.

In courses where students received no responses, study participants said the absence of feedback limited their opportunities to learn in multiple ways:

> "I think it would be good to have feedback since I am still developing not only as a thinker, but as a writer."
>
> "I think I would have become a much better writer earlier if I'd gotten feedback on those papers"
>
> "I kind of feel like in Psych. the professors haven't really critiqued my writing, and it's kind of frustrating sometimes, because I feel like I could do better [if they did]".

While research on the effects of positive or negative feedback on improving text quality have been somewhat inconclusive, studies do show that the tone of response impacts writers' attitudes: "students receiving negative feedback wrote less and developed negative attitudes about themselves as writers and about writing per se" (Zellermeyer, 1989, p. 149). In the few instances when students reported receiving extremely negative responses to their writing, students confirmed these finding saying these kinds of comments were discouraging and unhelpful. However, constructive criticism i.e., critical comments coupled with instruction, proved extremely valuable in fostering writing growth.

> Int: Were there any particular experiences that influenced your growth in confidence? Or like you say is it more an amalgamation of it all coming together for you at this time?
>
> 5th year Psychology graduate: You know, I do think that the experiences where I was shot down for my writing were ultimately the most useful. It happened twice my senior year. One was with my advisor with my thesis. And I don't mean to over-dramatize it. It was just I'd never really been confronted so much on: 'This isn't good,' when you think that something's good. Usually, I'm a pretty good gauge of how good something is that I've put out whether it be taking an exam or whatever. But also, a class—the seminar, Emotion, actually. I worked really hard on this paper. It was actually a mock NIH grant that I wrote and it was based on what I was going to do for my thesis which I had not yet begun on. And I worked really hard on it. And I was like, "Great! This is great!" And I got a C. And I never…at Stanford, I really hadn't gotten anything below a B+ for the first three years, and I was like, "Oh my goodness." I was floored and horrified. And ultimately my grade was fine in the class. But it was an exercise in humility, and also, he really taught me about being concise. He ripped it to shreds, and he wasn't afraid to. And it was really helpful.

While some studies have suggested that praise is an ineffectual form of response (Hattie y Timperly, 2007, 86), SSW study participants consistently reported that positive feedback built confidence and promoted greater engagement in their writing as a 3rd year Human Biology major noted, “I feel like one of the things that I’ve gotten that’s been good for me, in terms of continuing to motivate me to write, is a lot of positive feedback.”

How: Written VS Verbal Feedback

Whether in individual conferences with teachers in office hours or during course sections, asynchronously via email, or in conversations with peers, SSW study participants repeatedly emphasized that both oral and written feedback helped them understand reader expectations related to a variety of genres, and contributed to their growth as writers. Oral and written feedback share many characteristics; however, they also have different strengths and weaknesses: face to face conversations allow for a wider range of immediate inputs, including gestures, tone of voice, and the opportunity to adjust the focus of the conversation quickly, or, as Cho et al. (2006) found in their study comparing novice and expert responders, “speaking increased the fluency of comments, and facilitated the inclusion of more mitigating language” (263). Written comments provided a tighter focus on the particulars of a text.

SSW participants reported receiving helpful assistance from both modalities. As a 5th year Human Biology graduate said when asked what was the most helpful and important instruction he received during his undergraduate years, “it was that personal interaction where you could bring in a draft, and then also if you had time to come back”. Regardless of the medium, what writers said they appreciated was the ability to probe, question, respond, and even disagree with their readers, so they could purposefully synchronize their own writing with reader expectations, genre demands, and their own writing goals.

Some students expressed frustration with a lack of ongoing interaction, i.e., when written responses lacked personalization, a responsive dimension, and signaled the end of an interaction. Also, they described frustration when teachers wrote short, general, ambiguous, or undeveloped comments, which lacked sufficient information to generate an appropriate revision. As one student noted, “If they [teachers] could write why this doesn’t work here, or how I can fix this or make this flow better, or something like that, that would help. I feel like a lot of the feedback I get is very general, like: ‘You could explain this idea more clearly.’ And it makes me wonder ‘How?’ you know, ‘What can I do to make it more clear’?”

Overall, specific written comments proved much more useful than general written comments; however, rather than inherent limitations of print as a medium for response, what appeared to be missing most frequently in written feedback was the opportunity for readers and writers to engage in

an ongoing conversation. However, in some cases instructors proved extremely effective in using written comments to help students and found ways to create conditions for ongoing conversations with students about their writing, such as this 1st year Human Biology major:

> "I ended up with a really great TF who could write. But basically, I would send him email drafts of maybe a page, maybe the whole paper. And, after the first draft he'd send it back and he said, 'Okay, you can keep the first page, maybe. But we're going to need to rework the rest.' And so, it was like paragraph-by-paragraph. I would send him a paragraph, and he would write me back like a half page more than I had written him, really, in a response to me. So that was really essential for me to get. And then in the end, it turned out to be a good philosophy paper. So that was definitely a conversation-intense paper, a lot had gone into it, and I really appreciated it."

The above comments clearly show that written comments can possess all the qualities of a what we might consider as a dialogic interaction (that is to say, an ongoing, open ended, personalized conversation). Additionally, written comments could be adjusted to fit what was needed in each iteration or draft, and at times raised the level of student engagement by providing a framework for close interactions between students and their teachers. While in some instances comments came via the 'comment' feature in MS Word, the most important features of these ongoing conversations are not tool specific, but involve aspects of communication that move across platforms and tools. Some study participants did express a preference for face-to-face conversations, as individual preferences factored into the kinds of interactions that proved most effective. However, whether written or spoken, the most effective interactions took place within comprehensive environments of support, which included ongoing, face to face and written interactions that covered multiple dimensions of the writer's work, and included inputs and responses from a variety of readers, a finding that confirms research that suggests that feedback is more effective when information is gathered from a number of sources and conveyed in a variety of modes. (Brinko, 1993, pp. 576, 599).

When

The timing of response and feedback in research usually refers to the difference in effect between delayed or immediate responses. In describing the timing of response, the Stanford study participants clearly said they valued responses that occurred within close proximity to their performance. However, more notably, they described time in relation to task, course, and degree milestones, reporting overall that feedback was most effective and appreciated early in the task sequences. Additionally, students reported that feedback was especially valuable early in course sequences as well as early in their major areas of study. Receiving feedback early in assignments helped students to clarify their own thinking, as well as adjust to teacher expectations; students also found interactions with teachers particularly helpful at the topic selection and thesis development stages, as they could adjust and coordinate their performance in the very beginning to their teachers' performance expectations and their own goals. Interactions that took place early in the writing process provided, in

some cases, additional motivation for students, as teachers responded with enthusiasm to a writer's ideas, effort, and enthusiasm for a project. In upper division courses early engagement with readers was especially helpful, particularly for non-majors who needed to adjust to unfamiliar genres and new conventions.

4. Discussion

Enrollment in college involves taking on new roles, encountering new texts, communicating with new audiences, and taking part in repeat performance opportunities all of which may foster writing development (Carroll, 2002). From the point of view of the SSW participants, ongoing chains of communication with engaged and knowledgeable providers of feedback stood out as the strongest influence on their writing development. For participants these ongoing conversations (that is, sustained dialogue with an individual about a single text or multiple texts aimed at improvement) provided the writers with the best opportunities to receive salient and timely input at various stages of their writing processes, and across the knowledge domains (rhetorical, genre, and content) that contribute to high quality texts. However, even in their richest instantiations, these interactions existed as only one kind of influence within the larger learning environment of Stanford.

Individual students encountered these ongoing conversations at idiosyncratic places across the curriculum. This is to be expected given the non-linear and multi-dimensional (i.e., individualized) nature of writing development, and the emphasis on specialization in higher education. As individual students had different needs in different areas at different times, practices that helped one student had little effect on another. Moreover, "as writers progressed the kinds of responses they needed change[d]" (Freedman, 1987); this was particularly true of writers who were beginning to specialize and encounter new genres.

While, the one-way transmission of accurate and clear information (e.g., general instruction or single instances of feedback such as an end comment on a text given at the end of a course) can be valuable, to maximize student opportunities for learning, teachers must work to synchronize their efforts with those of the students (Riegel, 1979), and differentiate their instruction to match individual student's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). As Murphy (2000) noted, "Certainly, keeping how we respond consistent with what we teach [i.e., evolving disciplinary norms] is a valuable goal, but both what we teach and how we respond need to be keyed to the student's needs and level of understanding (p. 82)." To foster effective learning environments for writing development, what Freedman et al. (2007) refer to as "grand dialogic zones", educators must provide multiple opportunities for writers to receive responses to their writing in formal and informal settings, which, in higher education may best be fostered at the departmental level where they can be designed into the curriculum at strategic points.

Undoubtedly, efficiency and time management pose the greatest obstacle for to teachers who want to engage in providing more feedback to their students. On the surface, creating a classroom rich in

opportunities for giving and receiving feedback, implementing a dialogic curriculum (Stock, 1995), and engaging in ongoing communications with students over multiple texts and multiple drafts of the same text may appear unrealistic and overly time consuming. However, when readers respond to writers in ways that fail to match the student's sense of problem identification then regardless of the accuracy or clarity of the comments, this feedback (and the time invested in shaping it) may end up being, in the words of one Stanford student "thrown away". In this light, prioritizing and giving careful thought to giving feedback in the context of an ongoing conversation which privileges the writer's voice, may, in the end, prove a more efficient use of a teacher's valuable time than marking student papers with comments without a clear knowledge of the ways and extent to which they are being taken up by students. Furthermore, if these ongoing conversations are the leading influence on writing development, they should become the primary lens through which we view our pedagogy and curriculum.

Implications for Research

By themselves interview based studies (i.e., self-report data) are insufficient to provide a scientific view of writing development, for as Beaufort (2007) notes, "interviews, while extremely important, cannot tell the whole story" (215). However, from an integrated view of research (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 2013, p. 34), attending to the writer's subjectivity through interview data, that is, the construction of their writing situation in their own terms is salient in the overall writing research program because as Bazerman notes, producing texts always involves making personal judgments and decisions (University of California, 2006). Furthermore, understanding development from the point of view of the subject ought not be ignored for these accounts offer important constraints and support for other research claims.

Analysis of interviews from the SSW suggest that longitudinal methods that attend to the joint mediated interaction of the writer and responder over time and tracing these conversations across multiple contexts may yield more insights into what makes for feedback the best supports writing development. For instead of focusing on individual instances of teacher feedback, researchers would benefit from attending to the mediated interactions between a writer and his or her respondents over time as the cite where writing development takes place: for example, identifying when and how elements from prior conversations appear in later interactions, investigating how students take up responses provided by multiple participants (e.g., Prior, 1995), and considering how and when reflection on previous inputs informs writing performance.

Implications for Teaching

The implications for the teaching and learning of writing are potentially far reaching if indeed, personalized, ongoing, feedback on writing is the most impactful driver of writing development. In the first place, to maximize the power and opportunity that feedback provides we need to work to create

the conditions in which readers, teachers, writing coaches and tutors can develop and possess some, many or all of the qualities of effective responders that emerged in this research study. In this regard, professional development that focuses on the giving of effective feedback should be prioritized for faculty of all disciplines who work with students on writing and care about student's success as writers in and beyond college.

If our primary goal as instructors is to foster writing development in our classes and if feedback is the primary driver of learning to write, then our entire curricula, course calendar, classroom activities, assignment design, and assessments should be reimagined to create conditions in which students can consistently engaged in ongoing, open-ended conversations concerning their writing. Scheduling required and frequent conferences, building community, using group dynamics at all stages of the writing process, arranging for peer groups to work together both in and out of class, and modeling proactive behaviors in integrating feedback are some of the steps we must take in redesigning our pedagogy to foreground a more dialogic approach to writing development.

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