Writing in an Online Environment: Student Views of "Inked" Feedback

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Providing effective feedback on writing is a challenge in any learning environment, but it is even more problematic in fully online instruction. The lack of face-to-face interaction in web-based classes increases the need for highly transparent, prompt, and personalized feedback. Student views on the use of a semi-structured template combined with the "inking" feature of a Tablet PC for feedback on writing in an online course are reported. Survey results indicated the procedure was seen as providing clear and focused feedback with a highly personal touch. Students also reported being able to use the feedback to improve their performance on later writing assignments. Overall, this appears to be a well-received and helpful method for giving writing feedback to students in online classes.

"I always do the first line well, but I have trouble doing the others."

For many of us, reading this quote from Molière (Frame, 1967, p. 42) may lead to somewhat wry, if not outright humorous, musings as we make connections to our own writing experiences. For many college students, though, the difficulties encountered with writing offer little about which to smile. Their problems with the process often begin with the first line rather than after. As a result, improving the quality of student writing is a major focus for many instructors, and evidence of this can be seen in the ever-expanding number of Internet sites that address the issue (e.g., http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu & http://owl.english.purdue.edu/). Results from a descriptive study that explores providing feedback on writing for students in a fully online environment are presented. Specifically, the focus is on student views of a feedback method that combines the use of the inking feature of a Tablet PC with a semi-structured feedback template.

The Role of Feedback in Learning

Feedback has long been recognized as a key component for successful learning (e.g., Estes, 1972; Gagné, 1977, 1985; Wlodkowski, 1998). And the most effective feedback is that which is immediate and also provides explicit information on how performance can be improved (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1995; Schwartz & White, 2000; Winograd & Hare, 1988). This means that learners need to know not only if their work is correct, but, when it is not, they must be helped to understand the source of their mistakes and how to avoid making them in the future. Furthermore, good feedback also alerts students to the importance of taking an active role in their own learning and shows them how this can be accomplished. Feedback so designed will foster higher levels of self-regulation that, in turn, will work to decrease feelings of anxiety and

helplessness and increase motivation and learning (Bandura, 1993; Bruning et al., 1995; Buttler & Winne, 1995; Mory, 2001).

But a critical, and yet often overlooked, aspect of the feedback process is what students think about the feedback they receive (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). Although most instructors believe they provide clear and constructive feedback, research indicates many students do not share that view (Maclellan, 2001). If feedback is to lead to improved performance, we need to engage students in the process so that we are able to understand and respond to their needs. This is of particular importance when we are talking about instruction in an online environment because the dynamics of the territory are not the same as in a traditional classroom.

Feedback in the Online Environment

The lack of face-to-face interaction in an online class makes providing feedback especially important. Online learners consistently report that the lack of direct contact makes it difficult to form satisfying interpersonal relationships with the instructor and the other students. Without this connection and sense of community, feelings of isolation take over, resulting in decreased motivation and learning (Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004). Feedback from the instructor is the primary means of fostering a sense of connectedness and helping students to stay engaged and motivated to learn (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000; Gilbert, Morton, & Rowley, 2007; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004; Vonderwell, 2003).

The lack of face-to-face interaction in online courses also makes giving feedback more challenging. Central to this issue is fact that the mode of communication is technology based. Students in online classes routinely comment on the impersonal nature of class communication in comparison to what occurs in the standard classroom (Gilbert et al., 2007; Mullen

& Tallent-Runnels, 2006). "It [interaction] is not like person to person interaction. It's more like computer to computer interaction." (Vonderwell, 2003, p. 83-84). Students want to have personalized communication with their instructors and they feel they do better when the feedback they receive incorporates this affective element (Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Vonderwell, 2003).

The lack of physical presence in online instruction also requires that feedback be constructed as unambiguously as possible. In contrast to traditional instruction, the online environment does not readily allow for clarification through quick follow-up questions and there is no support from nonverbal cues (e.g., nodding or quizzical looks). When online feedback is not transparent, students often become anxious and lose motivation because they are confused about what and how well they are doing (Hara & Kling, 2001; Song et al., 2004; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004).

Time considerations also differentially affect the feedback process in the two settings due to the issue of physical presence. During traditional class sessions, questions or concerns are usually addressed immediately. In the online environment, the student often has to wait for a response. Depending on how long the delay is, it may adversely affect both student satisfaction and motivation (Haro & Kling, 2001). This point is illustrated by the following student comment: "It might take hours, maybe even a day or so before you get an answer back for the question…if you could ask it face-to-face, you might get better help" (Vonderwell, 2003, p. 84).

Approaches to Online Feedback for Writing Assignments

The development of effective writing skills is viewed as a central component of the educational process in our culture (Taylor, 2006) and most online classes are heavily oriented toward written assignments (Cavanaugh, 2005). Because of this, many instructors put a great deal of effort into providing feedback on student writing (Pengtiore, 2005; Sellani & Harrington, 2002), but it is often not well received or acted upon by students (Fritz, Morris, & Bjork, 2000; Wojtas, 1998).

Typically, feedback on written assignments in an online class takes one of three formats: a summary grade with no comments, a summary grade with general comments typed at the end of the essay—possibly with a few specific examples copied and pasted from the essay for clarification, or, an overall grade with editing and comments added into the body of the paper through the use of such tools as Microsoft Word's "track changes" or "insert comments" (Cavanaugh, 2005).

Given what we know about providing quality feedback, the "grade only" response is clearly of limited value. Although the "summary comments" method may be a better alternative, it has the potential to be ambiguous and lacks the visual impact of the traditional "pen in hand" approach that is standard when commenting on hardcopies of student papers. The track changes or insert comments features more closely resemble "pen in hand" in terms of being able to highlight problematic areas, but they are not as flexible, can be difficult for inexperienced students to use, and again lack the visual aspect of traditional notations such as drawing circles and arrows.

The potential importance of this visual element should not be ignored. Research suggests that students may have distinct learning styles—or preferences (see Felder & Brent, 2005) for "the manner in which, and the conditions under which, …[they] most efficiently and effectively perceive, process, store, and recall what they are attempting to learn" (Wehrwein, Lujan, & DiCarlo, 2006, p.153). Among the various styles suggested is a distinction in preference for receiving information in a visual (e.g., drawings and diagrams) or verbal (e.g., spoken or written words) format (Felder & Brent, 2005). Many students, including second language learners (Park, 2002), have been shown to favor visual input. Given the relatively common orientation to verbal presentations for instruction, numerous researchers have called for the inclusion of both forms whenever possible so that the needs of all learners are more likely to be addressed (Felder & Spurlin, 2005; Park, 2002; Sadler-Smith & Smith, 2004; Wehrwein, Lujan, & DiCarlo, 2006).

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to improve our understanding of the type of feedback on writing that students in online classes find the most helpful. Given the research on effective feedback, a semi-structured template, combined with the instructor's use of the "inking" or pen feature of a Tablet PC, seemed to offer the most promise for achieving the desired outcome: sound feedback that students would both welcome and understand. The template could provide an organized and theory-based structure for the feedback and the inking could give a clear (and also visual) focus and foster the personal interaction aspect. It was expected that students would see the inking with the template as personalized and easy to understand and, thus, helpful for the development of their writing skills.

Method

Participants

The participants were 57 students (52 females, 5 males) enrolled in an undergraduate, senior seminar in

Child and Adolescent Development at a large, public university in northern California. The course was a 16-week, fully online class that was taught via WebCT.

Feedback Form

At the start of the semester, the instructor emailed students a template of the feedback form (Appendix A). They were told to use it each time they submitted one of the 6 essays they had to complete over the term. At the top of the form, students listed their writing goals for the semester and then they copied and pasted their essay into the template. The actual feedback segment of the template was based on the *Essay Marking Guide* (n.d.) and also followed the principles in Ferris (2003), Weaver (2006), and Butler and Winne (1995), including maintaining a balance between positive and critical comments, fostering student ownership and responsibility, and maintaining a balance between text-specific versus generic comments. It also had an extensive listing of "hot-linked" websites to which an individual student could be directed for help on any issues requiring additional guidance. This checklist format was chosen over a traditional rubric (i.e., a form that also included generic descriptions of various levels of performance) so that the instructor could easily and quickly insert more personalized, student specific feedback. Students submitted their essays through the drop box on the homepage of the course shell. The instructor commented on the papers and completed the feedback forms using inking on a Tablet PC and then returned them to the students via the drop box.

Tablet PC and Inking Technology

Completing the feedback was straightforward and took a relatively brief amount of time. With the inking technology, it is possible to write directly on the computer screen just as you would on a hardcopy of the paper. Moving the curser, highlighting, inserting comments, erasing, etc. is faster than with the standard computer and keyboard setup because all of those actions are carried out with a quick stroke of the "pen." Furthermore, it allows for using just an arrow or even a large question mark to convey a point in a manner not possible with standard word processing tools. (See Microsoft Corporation, 2008.)

Student Survey

At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out an anonymous, voluntary survey of their views on the feedback process (Appendix B). The survey consisted of both Likert-scale and open-format items

and was based on Ferris's (1995) principles for effective feedback on writing.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the students expressed positive views of the process. In general, they perceived the feedback as highly personalized and as helping them to focus on the problem areas of their writing. Additionally, the majority reported using the feedback to improve their performance on later assignments.

Highly Personal Feedback

Eighty-four percent of the students reported that they always or usually "thought the inking feature gave a more human aspect to the feedback." Student comments on the open-ended items reveal a similar view with the most common response (69%) to the question, "What were the positive aspects of receiving 'inked' feedback on your writing?," being that it made the grading process more human and personable than they expected in an online course:

- "It seemed more personal. As if you were taking a class that was not online."
- "Inked seemed more personal and human than receiving typed words about what I should work to improve."
- "I thought it was awesome. When entering the class, I figured we were not going to get any feedback on anything and when I checked my paper I thought WOW this is so cool. I felt like it was a way that brought us closer to the instructor."
- "It… reminds me that my paper is graded by a teacher and not a machine."

Students also stressed how this process allowed them to see that the instructor was actually reading their papers and how important this is for their course experience:

- "It was possible to see that the paper had actually been read."
- "I appreciated that the teacher took the time to personally look over my work and write her thoughts and opinions about my papers."
- "I also like that it makes me feel that a good deal of time was put into the feedback. That was important."
- "It makes you feel like someone actually took the time to read your paper because the feedback is personal and addresses specific parts of the writing."

The survey responses send a clear message. Students saw this feedback method as providing personalized contact with the instructor, and, they viewed that connection as being especially valuable in the online setting. This highlights the importance of the student-teacher relationship in online classes (Mullen &Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Vonderwell, 2003) and supports past research that the feedback process plays a critical role in promoting such connections in online courses (Gilbert et al., 2007; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004).

Students also expressed views similar to those reported in Mullen and Tallent-Runnels (2006) and Vonderwell (2003) regarding the impersonal nature of the typed communication common to online courses. And, in contrast, they praised inked feedback as helping to improve this situation by giving a more human aspect to the process and more closely approximating the personal interchanges found in traditional classrooms.

Specific and Clear Feedback

Students indicated the feedback helped them to see what their mistakes were, what they were doing well, and how to improve their skills. Eighty-six percent responded with always or usually to the statement, "Having the template and the inking comments allowed me to focus my attention on the problem areas of my writing." This same view was repeated in 44% of the open comments made about the positive aspects of inking. Some examples are

- "I was able to see what the professor had a problem with, instead of searching for it…It gave me a chance to read over a sentence to see the difference between what I wrote and what she added."
- "It was easier to understand the areas that I needed to work on and what areas I did well in."
- "It [the template] has different sections (content, style, grammar), so the students know…their strength and weakness."
- "The most positive aspect is seeing the…mistakes made. It is very similar to the corrections and feedback…on papers returned back in person. The template also gives you more detail and understanding."

Furthermore, other comments specifically highlight the contrast between this method of feedback and the more traditional approaches to online feedback in terms of helpfulness in understanding what and how to improve:

- "I really liked having the 'inked' feedback on my papers because often times when getting feedback in online classes it is in an email which is more difficult for me to follow. It was nice to be able to have the feedback right next to the portion of the paper that needed more work."
- "It was better than just receiving general comments at the end that referred to problem portions of the paper."
- "I like having comments written exactly where the problem is rather than ONLY at the end."
- "It allows for the instructor to specify distinct areas that need improvement for each individual rather than a generic response."

These results indicate the students in this study recognized the value of and were anxious to receive clear feedback on their work (Hara & Kling, 2001; Song et al., 2004; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004). They reported that the template provided a good indication as to what the assignment requirements were and that the inking combined with the template helped them to understand both their mistakes and successes. Some students also noted that they found this process more detailed and easier to understand than other forms of online feedback - such as a summary grade, general comments, or a generic response – thus, illustrating its usefulness for providing unambiguous feedback in comparison to several of the other more commonly employed methods.

Helpful for Future Writing

Students also reported using the feedback to improve their future writing in the course. To the question, "How often did you use your instructor's suggestions when writing your next assignment?" 79% replied always or usually. And, 82% said they always or usually felt, "My instructor's feedback helped me to succeed in this class and to improve my writing."

The usefulness of the feedback for future assignments was mentioned in 60% of the open-ended comments to "list the most effective aspects of this instructor's writing feedback." The following statements illustrate this:

- "The template was helpful because after the first assignment, I knew from that what the instructor was looking for, as in how detailed our papers should be."
- "I think that having the template allowed for the students to have a guideline of what their writing should include that way the instructor

and the student are on the same page and have a mutual understanding of what the guidelines are."

- "Often you have to guess what the teachers expect and the type of writing they prefer. With the template, you don't have to guess."
- "I liked getting criteria to work on and what I should prevent writing the next time. Very helpful!"

Although one student wrote that she benefited from the instructor

- "…referring me to some of the links or websites to help me fix some areas of my writing for future assignments."

38% of the students indicated that they rarely or never consulted the websites links, even when their performance in an area was weak (survey question 11). Only 23% said they did this on a regular basis. Given that the instructor comments on the template directed students to review the websites whenever their work was weak in a particular area, it is clear that more needs to be done to help them assume a more active role in this. It may be that students need explicit instruction on how to make use of the template information--including something as seemingly obvious as the links (Butler & Winne, 1995; Goodrich Andrade, 2001).

Legibility Issues

This feedback process was popular with the students, and 34% specifically reported they saw no negative aspects to it at all, but there was one commonly reported issue—an occasional inability to read the writing. Approximately 50% of the responses to the survey item asking students to list any negative aspects of receiving inked feedback were about legibility. The comments below are typical of what students wrote:

- "Sometimes I had a hard time reading what the words said. However, this only happened on occasion."
- "Sometimes, I had trouble reading some of the comments, but [I] was able to after focusing."
- "I think using another color rather than red would be easier on the eyes."

Approximately 56% of students responded with "always" or "usually" to the statement, "When I didn't understand the instructor's comments or suggestions, I contacted her for clarification," and no students reported problems reading the feedback during the term

even though email was sent encouraging anyone experiencing this issue to speak up. Given this, and that legibility was brought up only after being asked to raise negative issues, it does not appear to be a serious drawback in the eyes of the students.

Conclusion

Helping students to improve their writing skills is an important and challenging task. If we are to be successful in this effort, we need to provide students with feedback they find useful and motivating. The focus of this study was to ascertain student views on the use of a template in combination with the inking feature of a TabletPC for feedback on written assignments in an online course. The findings clearly show that the method was well received by the students and that they considered it to be highly personalized, clear, and helpful.

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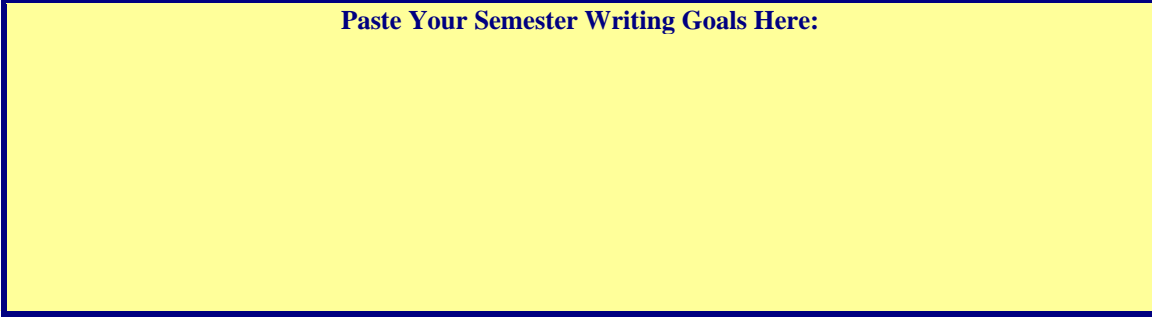
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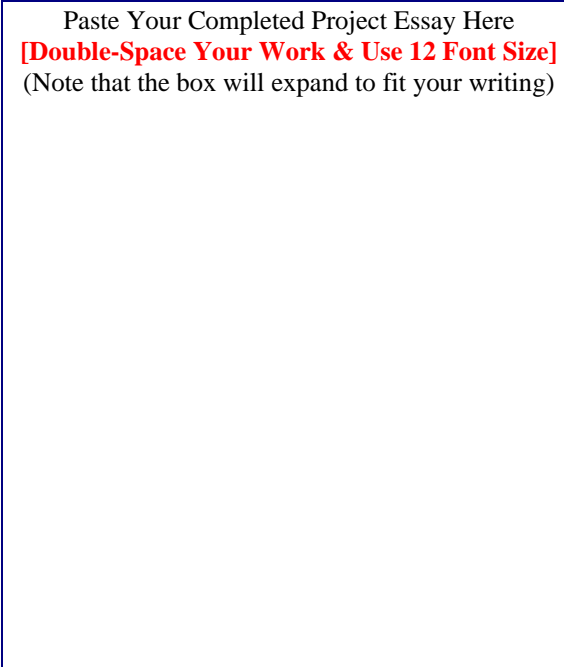
APPENDIX A
Feedback Template

Student Name:
Project #:

Paste Your Semester Writing Goals Here:

Paste Your Completed Project Essay Here
[Double-Space Your Work & Use 12 Font Size]
(Note that the box will expand to fit your writing)

Instructor Feedback

A. Structure of the Essay [1 point]

For improving this section of your essay see:
http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/e100essayorg.htm
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/write.shtml

1.   Does the introduction present a clear statement of the issues to be covered?

2.   Does the essay have a clear structure or organization in which
     a.   the main points are developed logically?
     b.   the relevance of the material to the theme or argument is clear?

3.   Is there an effective conclusion that draws the main point/s together?

Comment on A:

B. Content [4 points]

For improving this section of your essay see:
http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/e100devess.htm as well as your readings and **project instructions** for this seminar

4.   Is there evidence of adequate reading and research?
5.   Is the breadth of coverage adequate?
6.   Are the issues and ideas analyzed in sufficient depth?
7.   Are the arguments supported by evidence, examples, and sources?

Comment on B:

C. Analysis [3 points]

For improving this section of your essay see:
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/logic.shtml

8.   Are the arguments logical and consistent?
9.   Are the opinions based on research and fact?
10. Does the essay show evidence of original thought?

Comment on C:

D. Presentation [2 points]

11. Fluency, style, and clarity of writing
     http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/style.shtml
     http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/e100clarity.htm
     http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/e100effsent.htm
     http://cctc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/composition.htm

12. Spelling, grammar, paragraphing
    http://cctc.commnet.edu/grammar
    http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/grammar.shtml
13. Sources: Acknowledged and properly cited?
    http://www.apastyle.org/

Comment on D:

Grade:

Additional Sources for Improving Your Writing

http///www.calstatela.edu/centers/write_cn/e100proofcheck.htm
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/advice.shtml
http://www.powa.org/edit/index.html

APPENDIX B
Writing Feedback Survey

Directions: Please mark the response that most closely reflects your view of the feedback that you typically received in this class. Remember that your responses are totally anonymous and your name will not be connected with your answers.

Question 1

I carefully reviewed my instructor's comments on and corrections to my writing assignments.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 2
How often did you understand your instructor's comments and corrections?
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 3
My instructor gave me positive or encouraging comments.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 4
When I didn't understand the instructor's comments or suggestions, I contacted her for help or clarification.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 5
My instructor's feedback helped me to succeed in this course and to improve my writing.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 6
How often did your instructor comment on the content of your writing?
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 7
How often did your instructor comment on the style of your writing?
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 8
How often did your instructor comment on your grammar and/or syntax?
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 9
How often did you use your instructor's suggestions when writing your next assignment?

a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 10
It was clear that my instructor put care and effort into her feedback.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 11
If my performance was weak in an area, I consulted the websites provided in the template/feedback form for additional help.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 12
I thought the "inking" (handwritten) feature gave a more human aspect to the feedback I received.

a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 13
I thought the template was a good way to receive feedback on my writing.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 14
Having the template and the inking/handwritten comments allowed me to focus my attention on the problem areas of my writing.
a. Always   b. Usually   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never

Question 15
In your view, what were the positive aspects of receiving "inked" (handwritten) feedback on your writing?

Question 16
In your view, what were the negative aspects of receiving "inked" (handwritten) feedback on your writing?

Question 17
Please list any ways that you think would change or improve your instructor's writing feedback to students.

Question 18
Please list the most effective aspects of this instructor's feedback.

Question 19
Please list any special issues or problems that you believe impact your writing ability.

Question 20
Is English your native language?
a. yes   b. no