Feed More Back: Multimodal Feedback Toward Relationship-Rich Writing Courses

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Author Biography

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Our goal is to use feedback to increase student understanding of audience and purpose in collaborative writing projects. One-on-one feedback is difficult to accomplish in classes with large caps and multiple process-based writing assignments per semester. Providing detailed feedback is time-consuming, so writing instructors often resort to generic comments or even quantitative rubrics. We implement multimodal feedback strategies that foster meaningful connections in the classroom. In these proceedings we have integrated a multimodal feedback plan into two of our assignment sequences: 1.) an Instruction Set, Usability Test, and Results Memo, and 2.) The Freshmen "Theory of Writing" research paper process.

Introduction

Many studies in writing and composition pedagogy support the idea that instructor feedback allows students to enter new discourse communities and build their competence as writers (Adler-Kassner & Warner 2015 as cited in Cavaleri et. al. 2019). Providing detailed feedback, though, is time-consuming, so writing instructors often resort to generic comments or quantitative rubrics. The advent of online education has complicated traditional definitions of "literacy," and online courses in particular require a unique pedagogical approach to feedback throughout constantly changing technologies and interfaces (Griffin & Minter, 2013).With these concerns in mind, the authors have made a commitment to apply multimodal feedback within the courses we teach (Professional Writing and First-Year Composition, respectively).

The importance of human connection as an element of successful feedback cannot be overstated. Multimodal feedback should constitute an ongoing conversation, as Kalantzis and Cope argue in their recent study: "feedback is incremental and cumulative and recursive. A learner can keep asking for clarification and can offer feedback on feedback" (2020, p. 11). Multimodal feedback is preferred by students and helps them produce empirically successful revisions and complete feedback loops. Across the literature, scholars have determined that it is faster

to transmit information verbally than textually, though there is always an initial learning curve (Darby & Lang, 2019). The social aspects involved in giving verbal feedback (tone of voice, pacing, etc.) evoke a more three-dimensional learning than simply reading text on a screen, no matter how well written (Grigoryan, 2017).

Despite the amount of research on multimodal feedback across university writing courses, less research has been done on the efficacy of multimodal feedback in introductory professional writing courses; this inspired Jessica to try the practice in her own classroom. Jessica and Cyndy then discussed possible methods of multimodal feedback that could be used in any undergraduate writing course.

Institutional or Program Context

Jessica Mattox: I teach at Radford University, a regional, mid-sized, four-year public institution. Within the English major, a Professional and Technical Writing (PTW) concentration is offered. Students majoring in English with a concentration in PTW are required to take four professional writing courses. Many non-English majors are also required to take the first course in the sequence, English 306: Professional Writing. Students consistently struggle to understand the rationale and process for Assignment Cycle II: the Instruction Set, Usability Test, and Results Memo. Most of my students have never written instruction sets or conducted usability tests of those instructions; as a result, they often struggle with confidence in composing those genres. Armed with new research in the efficacy of multimodal feedback and continuing scholarship on backward design, I decided to implement a clearer rationale and new feedback plan for Assignment Cycle II in Spring 2022.

Cyndy Lopez Guerrero: Because of the population that composes our bordertown university (The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, or UTRGV), many of our students are either first generation college students, non-traditional students, low income students, or English as a Second Language (ESL) students, or often a mix of many of these labels, and are therefore considered to be "at-risk" very early into their college careers. As a result, many students enter into our required First Year Writing (FYW) courses (especially the developmental courses) with high degrees of doubt in their writing and reading proficiency levels due to negative experiences in the past with English courses or because of their lack of experience with college level work. Thankfully, long before I began teaching these courses nearly nine years ago, our department chair adopted a method of composition known as "Writing About Writing" (WAW) by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle,

where FYW courses were revamped to guide students through discovering their writing processes all the while gaining confidence in their voices and in the threshold concepts and skills they already bring into the classroom. Through this method, the projects in the class consist of students creating a portfolio of work that is scaffolded to lead into one another in a way that helps students with that discovery process in meaningful and creative ways.

Since adopting this method of instruction, passing rates for the courses have skyrocketed, and I'm very honored to be an early part of its inception. There is, however, one aspect of the course where many of us instructors are still experimenting with, and that is how to meaningfully incorporate feedback throughout the students' writing and creation processes. No one has stumbled upon the perfect formula just yet, but we have discovered that multimodal feedback is one of the best ways to engage students in the iterative, reflective, and social process that feedback is meant to be. Through this discovery, I have worked to implement those moments of meaningful and multimodal feedback into my classroom at every big moment of creation so that my students can feel supported in their journey in a way that assists them in recognizing the strong and worthy literacy skills that they possessed all along.

Overview of Approach

Jessica Mattox: Given that 2020-2021 was my first academic year as an online instructor, I am still gathering tools and strategies like multimodal feedback to ensure that students make the connection between my course objectives and their own writing process. Even in face-to-face classes, students need help making the "genre leap" required of them in my instruction set assignment, as most of them have never written instruction sets before. Providing opportunities for asynchronous practice and more formative, multimodal feedback are strategies I will use to increase students' confidence in new genres before giving a summative assessment.

Before writing their "official" instruction sets for the usability test, I give students a chance to practice writing instructions during class in small groups. Low-stakes practice allows students to become comfortable with a new genre before completing a higher stakes assignment. Usually, I respond to each group's instruction set in real time, reading it out loud and asking the group to describe their composing process. Afterwards, students are ready to submit their drafts to our learning management system (LMS) for my review. I usually respond in one of two ways–1) with a grading checklist and text-based comments followed

by an individual conference, or 2) simultaneous text and audio-based comments. Then, students are ready to complete peer review–in this case, the Usability Test–followed by another round of multimodal feedback from me.

Cyndy Lopez Guerrero: The second project of our aforementioned semester-long portfolio tasks the students with picking a line of inquiry and then using the concepts of rhetoric in the form of thinking about the purpose, audience, and form of their research and attempting to make strong and effective choices in relation to those three basic tenets of rhetoric (Wardle & Downs, 2022). Because of the newness of the task for most students, this is where my multimodal feedback strategies are most effectively utilized. To accomplish this, I use a program provided through our institution known as Panopto, which is a recording device that allows me to capture both my audio, myself on a webcam, and my computer screen. While using this program, I am able to record brief videos of myself offering facilitative feedback over what they might consider revising in the essay and what they might like to add to the next iteration of their draft.

I have come to find that this strategy aligns with student preferences of receiving feedback that 1) is very specific and detailed, and 2) carries a personal touch where students can hear my non-judgmental tone of voice as I review their writing so that there doesn't have to be an assumption that my comments come from a place of disappointment. These preferences make sense given that much research in the field has come to the same conclusions about what type of feedback students grow most from (Sieben, 2017; Chen et al., 2018) and finds that these strategies have the power to build hope in students so that they may have a much more positive attitude towards their own literacy skills (Edgerly et al., 2018). I believe this is especially important if I should like to fulfill the goal I have of building a trusting and supportive community between myself and my students and I believe multimodal feedback, in which my responses are much more specific and humanized, can do that work of supporting the development of my students' writing processes in a much more positive direction than their past experiences have often allowed (Buell, 2018).

Analysis and Assessment

Jessica Mattox: I present my pedagogy as an approach to multimodal feedback within professional writing courses. My professional writing assignment has three parts—an Instruction Set, a Usability Test, and a Results Memo. Helping students see *themselves* as readers of instruction sets helps them practice a "reader-centered approach," one that is advocated by my current textbook, *Technical*

Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach by Paul V. Anderson (2018). If students can determine what *they* need from instruction sets, then it becomes easier for them to write in the genre.

One of the reasons I include a Usability Test in Assignment Cycle II is to encourage student collaboration and refinement of the instruction set. Instead of text-only peer review, students must complete the tasks in their partner's instruction set without any outside assistance. Performing the individual steps in their partners' instruction sets helps students recognize potential issues with their own. Alvarez noted several social acts between the students in her study, and all of them are required for students to complete the Usability Test: reaching out to partners, setting up a work schedule, delegating tasks, and negotiating what gets included in the final submission (Alvarez et. al., 2012). The " joint construction of meaning" among students when reviewing their instructor's feedback allowed students not only to participate in but also to maintain their position within a disciplinary discourse community (Alvarez et. al., 2012, p. 395). I have modified my approach to this assignment cycle by adding more formative feedback from the instructor before the Usability Test. Students will be able to consult formative feedback from a larger portion of their learning community as they revise their documents for eventual submission and summative feedback.

Cyndy Lopez Guerrero: As I touched upon in the previous section, I believe multimodal feedback allows for moments that reflect to the students how writing and research truly exist within the field of rhetoric and composition. According to Roozen, "writing is a social and rhetorical activity" where "understanding the rhetorical work of writing is essential if writers are to make informed, productive decisions about which genres to employ, which languages to act with, which texts to reference, and so on" (Adler-Kassner & Wardle 19). Because the type of multimodal feedback I employ in my FYW classrooms brings in multiple modes of expression wherein students can not only see which parts of their essay I am referring to but can also hear the tone of my voice and watch my reactions to their writing in real time, the social aspect of the writing process remains intact instead of becoming stagnant on a page with unimodal feedback comments. And on a meta level, students can also see a demonstration of my own writing, revision, and feedback processes, wherein the generative and iterative aspects of what it takes to compose a rhetorical effective piece of writing are made much more transparent so that the myth that we as instructors are capable of creating "perfect" pieces of writing the first time are dispelled and that all works

of literacy require time, thinking, and rethinking, and that having that process be collaborative is much more helpful and effective (Berchini, 2015).

Building off of this, the multimodal feedback approach, I believe, also allows for moments where meaning is jointly constructed with students (Alvarez et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, my students often express that the type of feedback they have received in the past consisted of red marks on their papers that would strike through sections with comments above that simply stated, "irrelevant" or "revise", and that was if the comments were referring to the content of the paper and not simply instructing them to fix a grammatical error.

Lastly, I think that my approach to implementing feedback in a multimodal fashion allows for that feedback to feel like an ongoing and iterative conversation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2020) which then does the work of creating lively and positive feedback cultures in the FYW classroom (Edgerly et al., 2018).

Implications

In both of our respective classrooms, the use of multimodal feedback has made positive differences in the way our students revise their work. Not only are our students more likely to incorporate our suggestions, but they are also more likely to engage with and take ownership of their writing process(es). Although providing multimodal feedback is often time-consuming for instructors, we believe that it is worth the extra effort. In our own experiences, we have found that when instructors take a vested interest in student writing processes, students experience a boost in their confidence and competence as writers. We encourage you, as Darby & Lang (2019) would, to incorporate one small change in your teaching toward this goal . Even adding one more mode to your feedback (such as audio recordings or group conferences) can offer your students greater insight and provide opportunities for them to craft stronger final drafts.

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