Journal of Response to Writing

Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 2

May 2024

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge the thoughtful and thorough responses of my peer reviewers from the Journal of Response to Writing, as well as the comments of Faith Forrester. Their feedback has made the work much stronger.

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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

What Counts as Legitimate College Writing? Exploration of Knowledge Structures in Written Feedback

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Abstract: Research in feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020; Yu & Liu, 2021; Zhang & Mao, 2023) explores student use of written feedback and barriers to feedback uptake; the role of faculty in designing contextually appropriate feedback has been termed teacher feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2020). When feedback does not achieve desired results, faculty must evaluate their feedback practices; they may be unaware of underlying features that hinder feedback effectiveness. In this paper, a long-time instructor of first-year college composition (FYC) interrogates her own feedback practices using tools from the specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT, Maton, 2014; Maton, 2016a; Maton, 2016b). A translation device (Maton & Chen, 2016) connecting feedback data to LCT concepts was constructed to code responses to 105 student drafts. Subsequent analysis reveals that knowledge codes, which legitimate student achievement through the demonstration of specialized knowledge and skills, predominate in the feedback. Comments foregrounding the student writers' dispositions, intentions, and agency occur much less frequently. From these results, the instructor identifies potential barriers to student feedback uptake, including code mismatches and code confusion, which may be mitigated through adjustments to written responses and classroom instruction.

Moore, Miriam (2024). What Counts as Legitimate College Writing? Exploration of Knowledge Structures in Written Feedback. *Journal of Response to Writing*, *10*(1), 31–61.

The nature and efficacy of written feedback in first-year composition (FYC) has prompted research in the fields of composition and rhetoric (e.g., Anson, 1989; Batt, 2005; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Fife & O'Neill, 2001; Sommers, 1982; Sommers, 2006; Straub, 1996a; Straub, 1996b), applied linguistics (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2001, 2019; Li, 2010; Crosthwaite et al., 2022), and developmental education (e.g., Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Treglia, 2008). Researchers outside of composition and linguistics have also explored written feedback; Sutton (2012), for example, introduced the term feedback literacy, prompting cross-disciplinary exploration of student dispositions that enable feedback uptake (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020; Yu & Liu, 2021; Zhang & Mao, 2023). Carless and Winstone (2020) proposed a related teacher feedback literacy framework, foregrounding the role of the teacher in aligning curricula, assessments, and feedback to support student feedback literacy. Across disciplines, research in both student and teacher feedback literacy centers on an active and dialogic view of feedback: It is a "process through which learners make sense of information from various sources" and apply that information to their learning (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1315).

Unfortunately, this research also confirms what many of us FYC instructors have observed: Students do not always make sense of feedback and thus do not apply it consistently (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Devrim, 2014; Treglia, 2008). Winstone et al. (2017) identified four possible barriers to feedback uptake: awareness (problems decoding the feedback), cognizance (lack of strategies to respond to feedback), agency (feelings of disempowerment or ability to act), and volition (lack of motivation to accept or act on feedback). Like many of my colleagues, I have tried to address such barriers through pedagogy: I create opportunities for dialogue and offer incentives to counter roadblocks of agency and volition, and I make the purpose of my feedback explicit to address problems in awareness and cognizance. Still, I have found that my feedback, which seems clear and intuitive to me, is often neither for my students. This finding is echoed by others (Baker & Bricker, 2010; Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Rountree & Parker, 2017; Treglia, 2008; Winstone et al.,

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2017). Because my feedback practices are habitual, I struggle to assess them objectively; I may overlook features that work against course goals or inhibit student uptake of feedback. To understand how my feedback may impact student feedback literacy, I have spent nearly three years looking at my written responses through various analytical lenses. During this exploration, I discovered Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014; Maton, 2016b), a conceptual framework that has allowed me to interrogate underlying structures in my feedback concerning my course goals and my efforts to foster feedback literacy.

In this paper, I investigate my written feedback in FYC using tools from the specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory (Maton & Chen, 2020) to find answers to these questions:

1. What are the organizational structures underlying my feedback practice?
2. Do those structures align with the design principles of the FYC course?
3. What potential barriers to feedback uptake does my practice raise?

I will describe my FYC course, introduce Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), and define terms from the specialization dimension of LCT. Following this overview, I demonstrate how I correlated specialization concepts to my feedback data through what LCT calls a translation device. I then discuss the results and applications of the analysis for pedagogy and research. Ultimately, I demonstrate that my feedback privileges rhetorical and linguistic knowledge over my students' agency and writerly dispositions, a finding from which I can adjust my teaching to foster feedback literacy.

The FYC Course: Writing About Writing

The feedback I analyze in this study comes from two FYC sections I taught in the spring of 2019. I designed the course based on Writing about Writing pedagogy (Downs & Wardle, 2007) and threshold concepts

(Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). It focuses on eight key ideas, emphasizing transferable writing processes like decision-making, revision, and reflection (see Moore, 2021, for a full description of the course). Figure 1 shows the foundational concepts underlying the course.

Figure 1

Foundational Principles of the FYC Course

*Text and process-oriented concep*t

1. All writing involves choices that affect meaning: words, structures, details, punctuation, and organization.

Text-oriented concepts

2. Good writing pays attention to the needs and the knowledge of a reader.
3. People's words and ideas are valuable; We must handle them with accuracy and care when we write about them.
4. Specific writing tasks require us to follow the conventions of a discourse community.

Process-oriented concepts

5. Good writers seek feedback and use it to revise (not just edit) their work.
6. We can "never outwrite our reading ability" (Smith, 2010, p. 670). Good writers are good readers.
7. Uncertainty, difficulty, and confusion are normal parts of a writer's growth.
8. Reading and writing demand disciplined thought; Reflection is an indispensable tool for developing and honing such thought.

These eight concepts anchored the syllabus and framed the assignments, which included a literacy narrative, summaries with source integration paragraphs (the "progressive annotated bibliography," or PAB

assignments), and a researched essay. In addition, students were invited to create their own list of key writing concepts for their final exam. Given the primacy of the concepts in the syllabus, I wanted to see how closely my written feedback aligned with those concepts and how my comments might support or inhibit feedback uptake. For the study, I collected feedback on ungraded drafts of the literacy narrative, five PAB assignments, and the researched essay. While the course also included peer feedback and oral feedback in conferences, I only collected my written comments from drafts in Google Docs for analysis.

Data Organization

I divided feedback into two groups based on the nature of the assignments: literacy narrative drafts and research drafts (including PABs and the researched essay). Table 1 indicates the number of student texts submitted, the total number of comments, and the average number of comments per text. Note that submission of drafts was encouraged but not required; thus, there are fewer drafts per assignment than students. Also, note that the higher average number of comments in the literacy narrative reflects assignment length—1,000 to 1,200 words for the literacy narrative compared to 500 to 700 words for the PAB drafts.

Table 1

Overview of Feedback Data

Type of Assignment	Number of Student Texts	Number of Comments	Average Number of Comments/Text
Literacy Narrative	28	473	16.9
Research Drafts	77	496	6.44
Total	105	969	9.22

I defined the unit of analysis as a comment type or group of clauses related thematically. Content comments focus on propositional

content, related inferences, supporting details, and source interpretation. Text comments address organization, cohesion, and paragraph structure. Language comments cover word choice, grammar, style, and mechanics. Finally, summative comments treat the text holistically, addressing assignment requirements, student progress, strategies, and resources. A single Google comment could include multiple comment types, as in Figure 2, which contains both text and content comments. Table 2 provides an overview of the number of comment types in the data.

Figure 2

Sample Google Comment

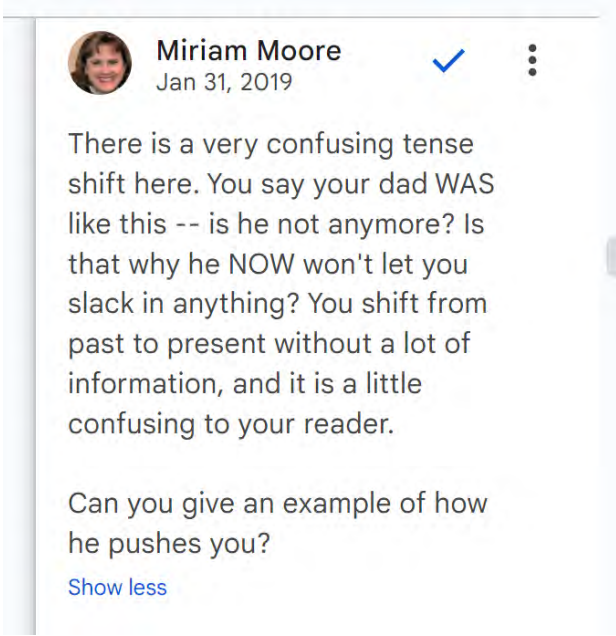


Table 2

Comment Types According to Assignment

Comment Type	Literacy Narrative	Research Drafts	Total
Content	409	324	733
Language	208	203	409
Text	77	16	93
Summative	98	197	295
Total	792	740	1530

Legitimation Code Theory

Legitimation Code Theory provides a "conceptual toolkit and analytic methodology" to describe how principles underlying a disciplinary or social practice organize what is—and what is not—acceptable or "legitimate" performance in that context (Maton, 2016a, p. 7). These organizing principles are called legitimation codes (Maton, 2016b, p. 240). The legitimation codes of a discipline are not always obvious or explicit; LCT analysis brings these organizing principles to the surface, allowing researchers to see familiar educational practices with new eyes and avoid what Maton (2014) has termed knowledge blindness:

> The organizing principles of knowledge shape the spatial and temporal reach, modes of engagement, and forms of development of social fields. They are key to social inclusion and social justice in both education and civic life. Though made by us, knowledge possesses properties and tendencies of which we may be unaware and which may lead to consequences that are unintended, even contrary to our aims and beliefs. (p. 13)

Although the LCT framework was relatively new to me, I chose to apply it to my data; I hoped the less familiar concepts of LCT would reveal

structures shaping my feedback and offer new insights into barriers for students trying to make sense of my feedback on drafts.

The LCT toolkit comprises a set of constructs or dimensions along which educational practices can be analyzed. I chose the specialization dimension for my feedback study, which explores "knowledge/knower" structures in social practices (Maton, 2016a; Maton & Chen, 2016). Morton and Nashaat-Sobhy (2023) have argued that specialization concepts from LCT provide "a powerful set of tools for revealing the organizing principles underlying the bases of achievement when teachers assess examples of students' work" (p. 6). Eight key concepts shaped the design of my course: three emphasizing texts or products (knowledge), four addressing processes or writers (knowers), and one highlighting both. Did the organizing principles underlying my feedback—and thus legitimating student writing—align with those eight concepts? The specialization dimension of LCT offered me a way to assess this alignment or lack thereof.

According to Maton and Chen (2020), a social practice is about something and enacted by someone. Epistemic relations characterize the something part of the practice; they indicate to what extent the practice foregrounds "specialized knowledge, principles or procedures" to validate achievement (p. 38). In specialization analysis, epistemic relations are annotated by the abbreviation ER and a range of values (++, +, –, ––) indicating how strong the orientation is. Social relations (abbreviated SR), in contrast, describe the someone component of the practice; they indicate how strongly a practice foregrounds the attributes of actors to legitimate achievement. In other words, epistemic relations highlight what counts as legitimate knowledge in the context of the practice, while social relations emphasize "who can claim to be a legitimate knower" (p. 38).

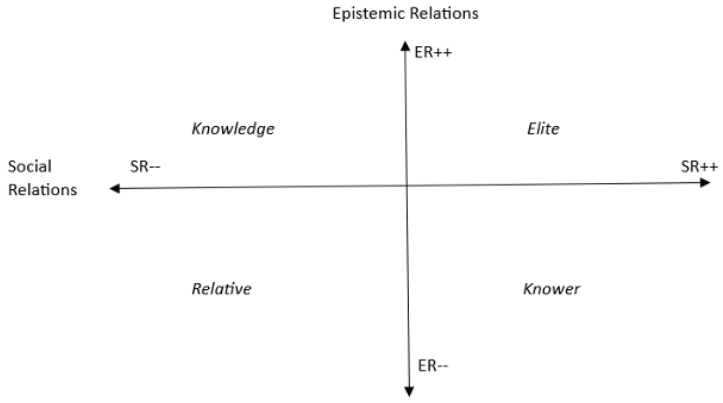
Organizational structures underlying a social practice are called legitimation codes. Combining values for both epistemic and social relations yields four possible specialization codes, each of which can be mapped onto a topography known as the specialization plane, as in Figure 3. Codes represent organizational principles structuring a given practice;

when applied to feedback, codes reveal how that feedback defines or legitimates achievement.

Descriptions of the four codes in Maton and Chen (2020) are adapted here for the context of composition feedback. Knowledge codes describe the practice in which achievement is legitimated by possession of specialized knowledge; to succeed in FYC, students must demonstrate knowledge about writing, language, and research. In knower codes, achievement is legitimated by being the right kind of knower; in this case, students must demonstrate the attributes and dispositions of writers. In elite codes, achievement is legitimated both by having the right knowledge and being the right kind of knower (writer). Finally, with relativist codes, neither knowledge nor writer attributes legitimate achievement (or "anything goes," [Maton & Chen, 2020, p. 39]).

Figure 3

The Specialization Plane



Adapted from Maton, 2014.

The Translation Device

Like all LCT tools, specialization codes were developed for use across disciplines. Therefore, the analysis of my feedback data required a

translation device to clarify how epistemic and social relations would be realized in the context of first-year composition. Maton and Chen (2016) detail the process of developing a translation device, which typically takes the form of a chart or grid with a summary statement of how epistemic and social relations manifest for each category of analysis (here, each comment type), as well as indicators for coding both types of relations at various strengths. Finally, there are examples from the data, as shown in Figure 4.

The full translation device for my feedback emerged over time as I reviewed examples of each comment type separately, moving back and forth between theory and data, as suggested by Maton and Chen (2016). For content comments, strong epistemic relations are realized as an emphasis on propositions supported by reasoning, evidence, or details. Implicit in all comments with strong ER is that readers expect a certain level of evidence for any proposition, and legitimate college writing should meet that threshold, as comment 1.1 (ER+) below explicitly states. Similarly, the questions in 1.2 and 1.3 request specific evidence to support student assertions; they are coded ER+.

1.1 I think keeping the focus on yourself—and your specific experiences—will work better than trying to make generalizations for which you might not have the evidence to convince a reader. (ER+/SR+)

1.2 By whom? (ER+/SR–)

1.3 How did you know? (ER+/SR+) Strong epistemic relations in content comments also emphasize accurate interpretation and use of source texts, as in 2.1 and 2.2.

2.1 I don't think this is his point at all. I think he is much more interested in how popular culture represents literacy. (ER++/SR––)

2.2 Unfortunately, the word "connect" here is not about connecting with peers. It's about connecting with prior experiences. This quote does not address collaboration or cooperative learning. (ER++/SR––)

Figure 4

Translation Device: Epistemic Relations in Content Comments

Concept manifested as an emphasis on:	Code:	Indicators: Queries and Comments that...	Examples/Stems from the data:
Logical and accurate propositions supported by reasoning, evidence, or details	ER–– Comments downplay (or fail to address) propositional logic, evidence, or accuracy of content in the developing text.	• make side comments; • give opinions that do not directly address student texts or sources; or • offer indirect instructional commentary.	• Nice. I am a big fan of Murray's. • This was the first book I read in French in high school. I loved it! • Ask me about this.
	ER–	• ask open-ended questions about content (opinion); • seek to clarify student meaning (A or B) without judgment; • assert confusion/lack of clarity regarding content (without passing judgment); or • query student comprehension.	• What do you think about . . . • Are you saying that . . . ? • I don't quite follow here. • Does that make sense?
	ER+	• request specific additional information or a specific TYPE of information (an example, a quote, etc.); • ask comprehension questions about source texts; • focus on logical conclusions; or • point out missing information: logic, details, or required source info.	• Such as? We need examples and details to see this clearly. • What is she trying to tell teachers? • This seems a little odd—obviously literacy is easier when you read better. Literacy means being able to read. • Where does it say that?
	ER++ Comments emphasize propositional logic, evidence, or accuracy of content and use of sources in the developing text.	• emphasize the correct interpretation of source material; • address misreadings of texts; or • correct application of course concepts.	• ?? This really isn't his main idea at all. He does mention a stereotype of the college professor in one sentence, but then he spends most of the essay talking about the difficult working conditions and low pay. • This is somewhat confusing. An act cannot be a Discourse—a Discourse is a defined group identity. The school culture could be a secondary Discourse, but an individual act or even stance towards reading can only be a feature of the Discourse, not the Discourse itself.

In contrast to epistemic relations, strong social relations (SR) in content are realized as an emphasis on the strategic processes, agency, and intentions of student writers. Comment 3.1, for example, affirms the student's effort and then uses a modalized directive ("see if you can") to suggest an open-ended expansion. The question in 3.2, which is coded SR+, positions the student's story as prominent, framing the needs of the reader in light of that story. The question in 3.3, coded SR++, solicits a personal reflection from the student.

3.1 You've got the right idea here—quotes from both authors and then a connection. See if you can expand that connection a little—is there something that Stromberg adds, something that is not in Warnock's piece? (ER+/SR+)

3.2 In terms of your story, why do you think that information is important for your readers? (ER+/SR+)

3.3 Do you think you were changing the culture a little? (ER–/SR++)

In weaker social relations (SR- or SR--), the student's authority to make decisions about content is downplayed or removed. In 4.1, the writer is expected to provide the information the reader has asked for and nothing else. The student's agency or intentions regarding the text are minimized, so it is coded SR-. Similarly, in 4.2, an assertion is described as inaccurate without reference to the student writer. It is coded SR––.

4.1 By whom? (ER+/SR–)

4.2 This is not quite accurate. (ER++/SR––)

Note that comments are coded separately for both ER and SR following the translation device. Figure 5 presents the social relations portion of the device for content comments.

Figure 5

Translation Device: Social Relations in Content Comments

Concept manifested as an emphasis on:	Code:	Indicators: Queries and Comments that...	Examples/Stems from the data:
The writer's choices, experiences, expertise, and control over the developing text	SR–– Comments downplay the writer's choices and use of source texts.	• require/request specific wording; • explain source texts to the student; • ignore the student; or • interpret student text in absolute terms (right or wrong).	• There are no other writers. This is just the text of her speech. So, you can set it up that way and make Rowling the speaker. • Peer discussion is just one thing she talks about; there are 4 other factors, along with social constructivist theory from Vygotsky, that are just skipped here. • Refute would mean to show the contention is false. Brooke concedes that the passive can be used to obstruct clarity; therefore, he does not refute this.
	SR–	• ask comprehension questions about a source text, or • tell students specifically what to include/demand specific information.	• Is this [source] about why writers write or what influences their writing in the process of writing? [One answer is right.] • By whom?
	SR+	• give a goal without specifying how to accomplish it; • ask students yes/no questions regarding their meaning or intent; • ask students to affirm comprehension of instructor feedback; or • give students responsibility for the content.	• I just think you need to connect this [to] the sort of theories he talks about. • Are you saying that _____? • Does that make sense? • See if you can expand that connection a little; is there something that Stromberg adds, something that is not in Warnock's piece?
	SR++ Comments emphasize the writer's choices, expertise, and control over the developing text.	• seek clarification of student meaning or intent with WH questions; • ask open-ended opinion questions; or • affirm and applaud student perceptions or conclusions.	• How do you think that would come about? What would it take to get them to believe that it's all important? • Why are their findings important, do you think? • Good. I appreciate the personal connection here.

The translation device in Figures 4 and 5 concerns only content comments; different indicators are required for other comment types, such as the following summative comments.

5.1 Jess , this does not do what is required in a PQ paragraph. Remember that PQ paragraphs have a quote or paraphrase from two sources, and they show a connection between those sources as well as your opinion. (ER++/SR–)

5.2 This is NOT a PQ paragraph. (ER++/SR––)

5.3 Bottom line: What do you want to tell readers about yourself as a reader/writer? If you can figure that out, I think the paper will come together. (ER+/SR++)

Stronger epistemic relations in summative comments emphasize knowledge of and adherence to assignment requirements (as seen in comments 5.1 and 5.2) as well as rhetorical basics such as a controlling idea (implied in 5.3). Stronger social relations, in contrast, foreground the intentions and writing processes of the writer (5.3). Weaker social relations may ignore the student completely (5.2) or downplay the writer's intentions, resources, or processes (5.1). Figure 6 summarizes both epistemic and social relations for summative comments.

While the indicators differ across comment types, stronger epistemic relations in both content and summative comments suggest that the student's work will be legitimated by their demonstration of specific knowledge or principles, whether that is knowledge of assignment design or principles of evidence. In contrast, stronger social relations indicate that achievement will be legitimated by student attributes—their intentions, decision-making, or strategic processes. Similar realizations occur with language and text comments as well, as shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 6

Translation Device: Epistemic and Social Relations in Summative Comments

Concept manifested as an emphasis on:	Code:	Indicators: Queries and comments that	Stems from the data:
ER Polished texts that meet the rhetorical purpose and parameters of the assignment	ER–– Comments downplay the final product or assignment requirements.	• highlight general strategies (not related to the assignment) or resources; • emphasize the process over the product; or • refer to previous instructor feedback.	• I'd recommend that you visit the writing center. • So, you've got an outline, but you're not finished yet. • Review feedback on our previous PABs.
	ER–	• query student comprehension of feedback; • contain invitations to collaborate; or • focus on the next step in the process or reminders to revise/edit.	• If that doesn't make sense, ask me about it. • Let's work through this again. • Make sure you leave time to proofread.
	ER+	• repeat assignment requirements; • direct students to improve the quality of assignment requirements; or • ask questions about readings or source material.	• Make sure you include two sources. • First, we want to make sure each sentence refers to the author: What is James saying and doing in each sentence?
	ER++ Comments emphasize the extent to which the text meets assignment requirements.	• evaluate the draft based on assignment criteria or requirements; • state what the text is (or is not); or • give positive/negative descriptions of the text.	• This does not do what the assignment requires. • This is not a PAB assignment. • Solid summary.
SR Processes, resources, and practices writers use to control their developing texts.	SR–– Comments downplay the writer's process, resources, or decision-making.	• describe student work objectively, without reference to student's effort or intent; • focus on instructor response (without addressing revision or the process); or • evaluate without reference to the student or the process.	• The paper shifts focus several times. • I can't find a thesis. • The paper does not do what is required.
	SR–	• remind students of specific steps required to meet assignment criteria; • ask about source texts (right/wrong); or • recognize but minimize the value of the student attempt.	• Make sure you include the author's name and the title in the first sentence. • What's the author's main point? • As I said, I think you have hints about his key points, but they are not clearly stated.
	SR+	• direct the student toward resources and specific strategies for completing the process; • invite a revision/offer a revision strategy; or • check student comprehension of feedback.	• I think you should visit the writing center . . . • First, you need to clarify your thesis. • Does that make sense?
	SR++ Comments emphasize the writer's control over the process, decisions, and resources needed to develop a text.	• evaluate the work or progress with emphasis on the student's process or effort, or • query student goals for the draft.	• This is a solid draft. Keep it up—you can do this! • What do you want your readers to understand?

Figure 7

Translation Device: Epistemic and Social Relations in Language Comments

Concept manifested as an emphasis on:	Code:	Indicators: Queries and comments that...	Stems or examples from the data:
Correctness and adherence to the conventions of academic English	ER––	• downplay clarity, formal conventions, and disciplinary expectations	
	ER–	• ask "why" questions about language, or • try to clarify a student's intent.	• Why did you _____? • What does "this" refer to?
	ER+	• point out problems with sentence structure/word choice (right/wrong), • ask students to solve language problems, • describe what "we do" as academic writers, or • discuss "readability" or style as opposed to correctness.	• There's another tense shift here. • Can you word this without using "helpful" and "help" together? • We would not capitalize this. • I like what you are doing, but the wording is a little awkward.
	ER++ Comments highlight formal conventions, accuracy, and correctness.	• correct and/or identify major sentence mistakes by name: comma splices, run-ons, fragments, subject-verb agreement; • explain correct usage; or • supply wording or conventions.	• This is a comma splice. • Remember that when you have quotation marks inside a quote, these shift to single quotes: 'identity kit'.
Agency to make stylistic choices that support a writer's meaning	SR–– Comments that focus on following conventions de-emphasize meaning, choice, and writer's style.	• ignore students; • contain directives with no explanations; or • issue corrections without explanations.	• Comma splice. • Don't shift to "you" here. • Format! • This is a fragment.
	SR–	• explain rules or expected practices; or • remind students to edit for specific issues.	• Don't forget that you need a comma before a conjunction: IC, cc IC.
	SR+	• give students responsibility for editing decisions/mention resources; • query student's understanding of language explanations; or • ask why a student made a language choice.	• Check your book for how to do a document on a professor's website. • See how that works? • Why is this verb past? • Can this be combined or condensed?
	SR++ Comments highlight writer's intent, choices, goals, identity, and style	• invite exploration and choices; • connect choices to author goals; or • invite students to clarify	• Think about the structure here and what you want to emphasize. • If this last part is the thesis, then you might consider a sentence structure that emphasizes it more. Right now, you have it in a subordinate clause, which sort of de-emphasizes this part of the sentence.

Empty cells indicate that no realizations could be identified in the data

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Figure 8

Translation Device: Epistemic and Social Relations in Text Comments

Concept manifested as an emphasis on:	Code:	Indicators: Queries and comments that...	Stems or examples from the data:
ER Cohesive writing that meets a reader's expectations for the genre	ER–– ER–	• downplay reader expectations and genre components, focusing instead on meaning and writer choices.	
	ER+	• identify problems; • ask questions so that students can find solutions to problems; or • offer choices.	• The shift in focus here is very abrupt. • Should there be some kind of transition here? • You might want to consider a new paragraph here, especially if you add details earlier.
	ER++ Comments emphasize meeting a reader's expectations for genre components, cohesion, and coherence	• identify a problem and provide a detailed explanation or rationale; or • give a specific directive to address a problem or request a specific change.	• The organization here is an issue for me. You introduce technology in the final sentence of the previous paragraph, so I am expecting you to develop that idea. But instead, this shifts to the Gee connection and takes us back to reading/writing (with no mention of tech). The next paragraph then jumps back to technology. • Set up his focus here—Friend is mostly focused on who is reading and responding to writing.
SR Choices that reflect a writer's meaning; responsibility for shaping the developing text	SR–– Comments downplay writer choices in favor of a reader's interpretation or needs	• ignore student intent or agency in describing problems.	• Right now, there's a sentence about reading, a quote from Gee, and then another sentence about reading—it's a bit jumpy. • Here's another shift . . . This is quite confusing for your reader.
	SR–	• use directives to tell students what to do (offer no choices), or • describe specific changes needed without directly engaging the student or the student's responsibility.	• Set up his focus here—Friend is mostly focused on who is reading and responding to writing. • I think some of this information needs to come earlier in the paper . . . I think it would help the reader clarify some of the confusing points if this background comes earlier.
	SR+	• give students responsibility for solving a problem, or • direct students in general terms.	• Make sure that the timeline stays clear for the reader—don't leave the reader to wonder if we are going backward or forward in time. • I think you can take the thesis and word it so that the point is perhaps clearer to your reader.
	SR++ Comments foreground a writer's authority to make meaning-based choices in the text	• invite students to make decisions about essay components, cohesion, and thesis; • connect choices to student meaning; • query or affirm student intent or purpose; or • give students control/full choices.	• Overall, I am a little concerned about the number of different ideas packed into this paragraph—do you think it is sufficiently focused? • The first paragraph seems to jump around—you mention your dad, and then quickly jump to the focus on French. Do you need to include that sentence about your dad in this paragraph? Could it wait?

Coding Methods

Having developed a full translation device, I coded all comments for both epistemic and social relations, yielding four possible specialization codes across comment types.[1] Knowledge codes (positive ER/negative SR) locate achievement in the demonstration of knowledge or principles, downplaying the agency (or even the presence) of the student:

7.1 This is not accurate. (ER++/SR––)

7.2 Comma splice here. (ER++/SR––)

7.3 This is getting long, and there is a shift in focus. (ER++/SR––)

Knower codes (negative ER/positive SR) foreground student attributes and agency while downplaying the demonstration of particular knowledge, as in 8.1 and 8.2.

8.1 Let me know what questions you have. (ER––/SR+)

8.2 So, are you saying that BEGINNING a book was exciting to you, but you did not stay excited long enough to finish the book? Is that it? Why do you think this was the case? (ER-–SR+)

Elite codes (positive ER/positive SR) foreground both the demonstration of knowledge or principles and the student's control over the text or writing processes.

9.1 Is there any way to help us share this? Smells are terribly hard to describe, but perhaps you could make a comparison that would help the reader? (ER+/SR+)

9.2 I am wondering if you can separate this sentence into smaller sentences with different punctuation. Right now, you've got 5 different conjunctions in this one sentence—I think you could make it more effective by dividing it up. (ER+/SR+)

Relative codes (negative ER/negative SR) are rare in the data and offer side comments unrelated to the developing text. They do not indicate how achievement for the text will be defined.

1 Because I worked with my own feedback in this exploratory study, coding was not cross-checked by others for reliability. As the translation device developed over a 15-month period, I revisited coding and checked for consistency over time.

10.1 Sometimes, I sit in airports or other public places, and when people find out I am a teacher, they start complaining about the "younger generation" and all the things they don't know. (ER––/SR––)

Results

Table 3 shows the distribution of codes by comment type in both the literacy narrative and the research drafts.

Table 3

Specialization Codes by Assignment and Comment Type

		Knowledge	Elite	Knower	Relative	Total
Literacy Narrative	Content	219	151	34	4	408
	Language	84	113	10	0	207
	Text	40	37	0	0	77
	Summative	29	52	15	2	98
	Total	372	353	59	6	790
Research	Content	252	63	7	3	325
	Language	91	107	3	1	202
	Text	6	10	0	0	16
	Summative	100	71	25	1	197
	Total	449	251	35	5	740
Total		821	604	94	11	1530

These results reveal two clear trends in the feedback:

1. The path to legitimation depends heavily on having the right knowledge: 93% of my comments across assignment types were coded knowledge or elite (either ER+ or ER++).
2. Legitimation also depends somewhat on the attributes and processes of the student writers, though not as much as demonstration of knowledge: Knower and elite codes (either SR+ or SR++) comprised 46% of my comments.

However, the distribution of codes across comment types suggests a more nuanced analysis. Strong epistemic relations, for example, predominate in content comments; only 7% of all content comments were coded as ER- or ER--. Thus, while students as writers/knowers are not completely ignored in content comments (after all, 255 of 733 content comments, or 35%, were also coded SR+ or SR++), my feedback clearly privileges the demonstration of knowledge and principles regarding content development and sources.

Moreover, the ratio of knowledge to elite codes differs for each comment type. Knowledge codes account for more content comments (471 of 733, or 64.3%) than elite codes do (214 of 733, or 29.2%). However, in language comments, elite codes account for more of the total (53.8%) than knowledge codes do (42.8%). While strong ER dominates in language comments (with 396 of 409 comments coded ER+ or ER++), 57% of language comments are coded SR+ or SR++ (57%). Results thus suggest I am more likely to emphasize student responsibility and choice in language comments than in other types of comments.

Discussion

Research Questions 1 and 2

I analyzed my feedback to explore its underlying structures, assess alignment with the principles of my pedagogy, and discover potential barriers to student uptake. My feedback clearly rests on strong epistemic relations (ER+ and ER++), as indicated by the prevalence of knowledge

and elite codes in the data. This result aligns with the first four foundational concepts of my course (see Figure 1). The agency and attributes of student writers factor into achievement and align with the foundational concepts. However, they do so primarily in conjunction with knowledge, as evidenced in the distribution of codes: Elite codes (strong ER and SR) comprised 39% of the comments, whereas knower codes (weak ER and strong SR) comprised only 6%. I was somewhat surprised by the dominance of knowledge codes in the results; after all, I aimed to present the foundational concepts equally in my pedagogy, emphasizing choices, strategic processes, growth, and ownership just as much as I stressed accuracy, genre features, language, reader expectations, and documentation. I was particularly surprised by the distribution of knowledge and elite codes in content and language comments.

In reviewing that distribution, I recalled the "novice-as-expert" paradox described by Sommers and Saltz (2004). My feedback positions students as novices who must acquire knowledge about genres, content, and language to satisfy their readers, hence the prevalence of knowledge codes. At the same time, I ask students to begin positioning themselves as authorities within the context of their papers, as knowers who take responsibility for and exercise control over the writing process; this is reflected in comments with stronger SR (elite and knower codes). As my course concepts state, early agency in writing can lead to uncertainty, difficulty, and confusion; however, emphasizing specific knowledge may address some of that uncertainty. Sommers and Saltz suggest the authority of first-year writers comes not from "writing from expertise" but "writing into expertise." First-year writers "learn to write by first repeating the ideas they encounter in the sources they read and the teachers they admire, using the materials and methods of a course before making them their own" (p. 134). When I comment on content, I assume that students are not yet writing "from expertise," particularly in the researched essay. They do not yet know what I know—the expectations academic readers will have for accuracy, logic, and development (see Bartholomae, 1986,

p. 9). Thus, stronger ER predominates in content comments. However, Bartholomae (1986) argues that novice college writers "must imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders'—that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak" (p. 10). Whereas my content comments prioritize the need to master knowledge, my language comments more often prioritize both knowledge and the student writer, as indicated in the higher percentage of elite codes. Such elite codes invite students to accept the privilege Bartholomae describes and exercise the "right to speak." Thus, language comments align with the first foundational concept of the course, which ties knowers and knowledge together: All writing involves choices that affect meaning: words, structures, details, punctuation, and organization. Students need to know how words, structures, and punctuation impact meaning; they also need to exercise agency and choose how to deploy that knowledge. Elite codes, predominant in language comments, center student agency, allowing students to make choices in relation to their goals and purposes, as shown in the following examples:

11.1 If this last part is the thesis, then you might consider a sentence structure that emphasizes it more. Right now, you have it in a subordinate clause, which sort of de-emphasizes this part of the sentence. (ER+/SR++)

11.2 This is a comma splice. Check for these. If you can replace any comma with a period, then that comma is actually a comma splice, and it needs to be corrected. (ER++/SR+)

11.3 Think about the structure here and what you want to emphasize. (ER+/SR++)

Research Question 3

How do the structures underlying my comments facilitate or impede students' feedback literacy—their ability to accept, understand, and apply feedback effectively? As Carless and Winstone (2020) have argued, students develop feedback literacy in an interplay with teachers, who create conditions that support student comprehension and feedback application.

Creating such conditions requires awareness of potential barriers—or mismatches between instructor and student perspectives—that may hinder feedback uptake. A proactive stance to managing such potential barriers is, as Carless and Winstone (2020) suggest, an integral part of teacher feedback literacy.

Based on previous instruction, for example, some students may have acquired writing knowledge that does not match the knowledge required for FYC assignments. Recent high school graduates may expect that college writing will emphasize five-paragraph essays, formulaic introductions or thesis statements, and certain stylistic features. These expectations set up a knowledge mismatch, leading to potential frustration with teacher feedback. Consider the example in 12.1: The student had been told that college writers never use first-person pronouns; my comment was perceived as a challenge to his writing knowledge.

> 12.1 The efforts to do this in the third person are problematic. If you were describing someone else, this would be fine. But since this [is] you, I see no reason for the verbal gymnastics (including pronoun agreement issues) required to keep it third person. (ER+/SR–)

Could this knowledge mismatch serve as a gateway to more closely align with the first of my course principles (all writing involves choices that affect meaning)? Consider this revision, which shifts the underlying structure of the comment to positive SR:

> 12.1, Revised: The efforts to do this in the third person are problematic for your reader, especially since you are talking about yourself. You've got some interesting verbal gymnastics here (including pronoun agreement issues). Could you experiment with using the first person to see how it works? Or perhaps shift this to a character (i.e., "this writer"), blending an active third person with a perspective that is clearly your own? (ER+/SR+)

Another barrier, code mismatch, may arise from previous educational experiences, particularly for international students who have not experienced feedback with stronger social relations (i.e., elite or knower codes). For me, elite codes are invitations for writers to take responsibility, as in

13.1. For students accustomed to knowledge codes, however, such comments may be interpreted as failure to provide clear guidance (for a fuller discussion of this type of code mismatch, see Maton & Chen, 2020).

> 13.1 Look back through those first sentences and think about WHY you are introducing this idea next. You might want to consider rearranging some ideas or at least giving your reader a bit more structure . . . . Reverse outlining your paper and thinking about the topic sentences can help you get the organiza-tion under control. (ER+/SR+)

Code mismatch may also occur when summative comments coded SR+/SR++ point students to out-of-class resources such as the writing center, open labs, or office hours, as in 14.1. If prior educational experience has framed such resources as punishments or indicators of failure instead of opportunities, students may reject the advice.

> 14.1 I am going to recommend that you work with the writing center, and you can come to the open lab after class on Friday, too. (ER−−/SR+)

Code mismatches can be addressed explicitly through instruction and adjustments to grading criteria. Recently, for example, I have adopted a two-part grading system based on participation (highlighting strong SR) and a final portfolio of student-selected works (emphasizing strong ER), assessed via specifications (see Nilson, 2014). Students earn participation points by using campus resources strategically and submitting reflective annotations to indicate how they have attempted to apply feedback to the final portfolio—even if the attempts are not especially effective. My revised grading aligns feedback and foundational concepts while fostering feedback literacy by foregrounding a connection between feedback and learning (see Chen & Liu, 2022).

A third potential barrier is code confusion; students may not recognize how to interpret what comments are asking of them. There is no one-to-one correlation between ER or SR coding and grammatical mood; for example, questions, directives, and statements—along with modalized forms of each—occur across all codes. A question may serve to clarify the student's intent as a writer (8.2), challenge an interpretation (15.1),

demand information (4.1), or encourage additional thought (3.1, 3.3). Making sense of these questions—and responding appropriately—poses a challenge to student writers.

15.1 Where does it say that? (ER+/SR–)

Similarly, declarative comments coded as ER+/ER++ (such as the blunt statements in 5.1 and 7.2) are meant to provide critical knowledge for revision. However, these may be interpreted as absolute assessments. In such cases, students may see no point in revising; after all, the paper is "no good." As with example 12.1, the addition of SR positive language (emphasizing strategic processes, resources, or clear avenues for revision) may help counter code confusion, turn barriers into gateways, and create conditions that facilitate student feedback literacy.

Conclusion

LCT analysis does not label feedback practices as "right" or "wrong." Feedback is one component of an overall pedagogy, and feedback-literate teachers will make theory-conscious and data-informed adjustments within that pedagogy (Carless & Winstone, 2020). Assuming a proactive stance toward potential mismatch or confusion is critical to creating conditions for feedback uptake and the growth of feedback literacy. Proactive strategies include preparing students for my feedback in class (see Eckstein, 2022), tweaking comments to ensure a balance of ER and SR language, and engaging students as partners in feedback loops, which foregrounds shared responsibility for learning. In fact, Chen and Liu (2022) suggest that high student feedback literacy is marked by awareness of this partnership, along with recognition of the connection between feedback and learning. LCT analysis affirms that my comments emphasize knowledge (strong ER) to address existing problems and the writerly dispositions (strong SR) that should help students carry that knowledge beyond the paper at hand. As I adjust my comments, I can make my strategies transparent, helping students not only interpret those comments but also recognize their value for learning—not just a grade.

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My LCT analysis represents an exploratory study: As the classroom instructor, the theorist, and the analyst, I cannot extend my results beyond myself and the contexts in which I teach. Despite major limitations to generalizations based on my results, I believe the study indicates the potential value of individual and small-group exploration of teacher feedback literacy based on LCT analysis. This study, which evolved over three years, led to months of immersion in my own feedback; during that time, I began to see what I had written differently. As I developed and applied the translation device, I found myself questioning the clarity and purpose of my responses. As indicated in the discussion, I also adjusted my practices. Such adjustments present avenues for future research, including collaboration with students to assess how specific changes are understood and applied.

As invaluable as this analysis process has been, I know the material conditions of FYC instruction make such solo projects impractical or impossible for others. However, LCT tools—including various published translation devices—can be applied to smaller data sets by groups, and there is an active community willing to collaborate and consult in classroom research. LCT cannot address all barriers to feedback uptake nor provide a blueprint for giving the most effective feedback to FYC students. Instead, it offers teachers an option for researching feedback practices. The more we understand the structure of those practices, the more effectively we can adjust them to support our students.

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