'True', 'fair', or 'too picky': to what extent can students translate their ideas about good essay writing into helpful peer feedback? (0222)

Natalie Usher
University of Oxford, UK

Background

Academic writing is crucial to student success, yet not often explicitly taught in the UK as most universities operate on a remedial 'study skills model' (Lea & Street, 1998). In recent years, against a backdrop of increasing criticism of this model, research interest in supporting student writing development has grown (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). The present study examines how peer feedback provides a rich opportunity for learning about academic writing in the discipline. This paper specifically explores the extent to which students can translate ideas about writing quality, developed through appraising examples, into helpful peer feedback.

The study puts into practice Sadler's (2010) proposal for formative assessment to better serve learning by including opportunities for students to appraise a range of work. Evaluating complex examples should empower students to develop their own understanding of task compliance, quality and criteria, and thus better enable them to self-monitor as they work (Sadler, 1989; 2010). This proposal has potential for supporting writing development for two key reasons. First, Sadler proposes that students appraise holistically, with criteria emerging from the examples, rather than being pre-set. This should enable tacit and fuzzy aspects of writing not well-captured in course criteria to arise and also students to construct criteria in their own words. Secondly, key to writing development is self-regulation (Graham, 2006). Sadler's description of self-monitoring resonates with contemporary definitions of self-regulated learning as '*proactive* processes that students use to acquire academic skill, such as setting goals, and self-monitoring one's effectiveness' (Zimmerman, 2008: 166-167). Understandings of quality and task compliance feed into students' initial task interpretations, which shape the way self-regulatory strategies are deployed as they work (Hadwin & Winne, 2012).

Recent studies have highlighted how reviewing peers' work can be beneficial to the reviewers' own writing (e.g. Cho & Cho, 2011; Cho & MacArthur, 2011). However, students may not consider the feedback they receive as equally helpful, with trust in the quality of peer feedback a particular issue (Cartney, 2010; McConlogue, 2014; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014).

The study

This paper will examine the extent to which students who appraise a range of examples can translate this expertise into helpful peer feedback. The study took a design-based approach to developing and evaluating four two-hour peer assessment workshops. 21 first-year English Language and Literature undergraduates volunteered to take part in addition to usual teaching. The genre of focus was a timed exam essay responding to a short quotation with a question. Pre-workshop interviews with 12 students indicated that students can struggle to work out how to use the quotation and question in their response. Task compliance is also highlighted as problematic in examiners' reports.

Over four workshops, students read, appraised, wrote responses to and discussed five authentic examples. Students were asked to appraise holistically, commenting on what they saw as contributing to and detracting from the quality of the essay, focussing on writing rather than content. Criteria were only discussed and negotiated after three essays. Participants then wrote an essay of their own in exam conditions. These essays were anonymised for review by three peers from other workshop groups. In the final session, students received three anonymous reviews and had the opportunity to reflect and respond.

This paper draws on peer feedback, student responses to feedback, and 10 follow-up interviews to address the following research question: to what extent can students translate their ideas about writing quality into helpful peer feedback?

Findings

Students wrote rich and detailed feedback, with the mean word count for the total feedback that each received at 496 words (SD = 91). Inductive content analysis highlighted that although feedback drew on a wide range of criteria, 90% of the reviews referred to task compliance, a criterion chosen by all three workshop groups. All students gave and received comments on how essays 'engaged with,' 'tackled,' or 'addressed' the quotation and question. However, feedback tended to go beyond whether the criterion was simply met, with comments linking task compliance with argument and structure, for instance.

While students did not necessarily agree with all of the feedback, for example considering points 'too picky' or unsupported, all were able to identify particularly helpful comments that were 'true', 'fair', or even 'illuminating'. For many students, having three reviews enabled them to contextualise each reviewer's comments and so weigh up their value. Where perspectives were 'similar', feedback was

more credible. As one student put it, 'this proves to me that their feedback is worth taking on board.' Students did not necessarily respond to feedback as an unquestioned set of points for immediate action, but rather filtered it through their own ideas about essay writing and their knowledge of their own writing. This suggests that having students review examples of work before exchanging feedback enabled them to act as proactive self-regulating learners. However, in common with previous research (e.g. Wingate, 2010), the tone of comments varied, influencing how the feedback was received. A small minority of reviews, in the words of one recipient, were 'blunt' and 'cutting' in tone, and yet other students were surprised by the positive nature of reviews, with one going as far as considering reviewers to be 'hampered by how polite they are'.

Conclusion

In this study, although students did not necessarily agree with all of their feedback, the majority who evaluated the workshops (13 of 20 students) found both reviewing and receiving feedback equally useful, as opposed to either just reviewing essays (6 students) or receiving feedback (1 student). As Sadler (2010) suggests with staff-student feedback, it seems that peer feedback is likely to be easier to interpret, weigh up and use when students themselves have had the opportunity to develop their own ideas of writing quality. A further implication is that assessing a range of essays can help students understand what it means to 'answer the question' and how task compliance shapes other aspects of writing.

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