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'It has a purpose beyond justifying a mark': examining the alignment between the purpose and practice of feedback

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ABSTRACT
Research has shown that written feedback is important for student learning and development. However, the messages embedded in feedback may lead to students being misled about what they need to learn or how they need to develop. This article reports on a small-scale investigation into the messages embedded in feedback. Legitimation Code Theory was used to first conceptualise the often-hidden purpose of a discipline (English Studies), and concomitantly of feedback within the discipline, and second to analyse actual comments given to first-year students on their assignments. It was found that there is a clear misalignment between the purpose and practice of feedback, thereby suggesting that students are receiving misleading messages about what they need for success within the discipline. This may have implications beyond merely passing the module. A suggestion is made to actively consider, and develop, feedback as a discipline-specific literacy.

KEYWORDS
Feedback; English Studies; knower code; student writers

Introduction

Research has shown that feedback is central to student learning and that it is one of the most important tools for improvement and development (Carless 2006; Parkin et al. 2012). Feedback is therefore meant to help students, both in improving their essay writing skills, and in becoming active, knowledge-producing participants in higher education. Yet, how effective is feedback at the latter? Though there is much research on feedback in relation to student writing (see Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Burke 2009; Dowden et al. 2013), there is less research on how feedback can enable students to connect their writing with knowledge-building, and seeing what kinds of knowledge and meanings are valued, and why, in a discipline.

To determine the helpfulness of feedback, it is necessary to consider the messages about disciplinary knowledge practices embedded in written feedback. This article, therefore, aims to examine whether the practice of feedback is aligned with the purpose thereof by unpacking the hidden messages in written feedback and considering what the consequence of these messages might be for student learning and development. It focuses specifically on written feedback on first-year English Studies students at a medium-sized historically disadvantaged South African university. The article, perhaps slightly circuitously, will start by looking at the general purpose of feedback and then move closer to the discipline in question. In order to conceptualise the nature of English Studies, and by extension, what feedback *should* focus on, the analysis will draw on Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). Ultimately, the article hopes to indicate that if feedback is to

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truly help students, then there needs to be a closer alignment between feedback purpose and practice so that the messages embedded in feedback can be useful for student success in higher education, and not merely create competent essay writers. Although the study is located within a South African context, the underlying issues inherent in the feedback giving/receiving process are global (see, for instance, Carless 2006; Weaver 2006; Burke 2009; Murtagh and Baker 2009).

Literature review

Feedback, according to Carless et al., may be defined as 'dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate performance on future tasks' (2011, 397). Feedback may, consequently, be aimed at improving a specific essay (such as between drafts), or, more generally, may be given to improve a student's writing and aid in their learning and development (such as from one assignment to the next). As such, we may distinguish between two broad forms of feedback, namely evaluative and developmental (Lizzio and Wilson 2008; Burke and Pieterick 2010).

Evaluative feedback tends to look back on an assignment (Burke and Pieterick 2010) and points to errors that a student has made in a specific essay. The aim with evaluative feedback is to inform a student how well she has performed in the current assignment/task. Developmental feedback, on the other hand, is forward looking – it may look at a current essay, not only with the aim to point out errors, but also to indicate why they are errors, how to avoid these errors, and how to become a better writer, thinker and scholar in general. This type of feedback, therefore, feeds forward (Higgins 2000) into future assignments, and beyond.

Underlying developmental feedback is an additional, though tacit, epistemic function, as feedback may enhance epistemic access (Luckett and Hunma 2014); that is, it may assist in providing expanded access to the inner workings of a discipline, so that students may become more successful participants in the discipline. Feedback, therefore, although it is but one instance of pedagogy that is aimed at making the nature of a discipline accessible to students, plays a central role, as it is not just a tool for helping students improve their writing but is also a necessary component to students becoming 'effective practitioners in the domain of their study' (Boud and Molloy 2013, 704). These explicit and implicit functions point to the important role that feedback, specifically written feedback, plays in higher education.

The importance of feedback is therefore highlighted by it often being the only form of personalised communication that students receive from their tutor or lecturer about their 'performance and progress' (Brown et al. 2004) within a discipline. Furthermore, due to increasing numbers of students and concomitant time constraints on tutors and lecturers, feedback must progressively fulfil the same role as one-on-one consultations between student and educator (Higgins et al. 2001). Additionally, feedback may assist students adapting to university and disciplinary ways and practices by making these clear(er) to students (Lillis 2001), and is, therefore, especially important at first year level (Dowden et al. 2013). Feedback, then, by the end of a student's first year should at a basic level enable students to improve their writing according to disciplinary conventions and assist them in (at least partially) understanding and accessing the inner workings of a discipline. The messages that feedback conveys – about the students, academic writing and the university (Ivanič, Clark, and Rimmershaw 2000) – are thus very important not only in terms of enabling students' access to the university practices in general, and disciplinary practices specifically, but also their becoming successful participants in higher education. The importance of feedback, therefore, reaches beyond improving academic writing.

Yet, despite the importance of feedback, there are various problems inherent in the process, which may be divided into problems based in receiving feedback and in giving feedback. In terms of receiving feedback, research has shown that students are often dissatisfied with the feedback they receive. Feedback may not provide clear advice to students (Duncan 2007), may

be too broad or general (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001), may be too difficult to implement (Murtagh and Baker 2009), or it may be too difficult to understand (Weaver 2006). Additionally, the focus of feedback may not be helpful, for instance feedback that provides too much praise and not enough advice (Duncan 2007), that is too negative (Weaver 2006), or in which there is an over-focus on pedantic points at the expense of higher order concerns (Ferguson 2011). Moreover, the process of receiving feedback in higher education is hampered by the difference in approaches to feedback between high school and university. University educators tend to take a dialogic, developmental approach to feedback, whereas students may be used to an evaluative approach. As such, they may not be familiar with dialogic feedback and may therefore not be able to respond to it effectively (Kapp and Bangeni 2005).

On the giving end of feedback are the tutors and lecturers who provide the feedback. One of the biggest hurdles in giving feedback is the massification of higher education, and the concomitant increase in student numbers (Hornsby and Osman 2014). More students mean more assignments to mark, and more feedback to give. Yet, educators often do not have the necessary time to give students the feedback they need. They may therefore revert to evaluative feedback as it is easier and less time-consuming to point out errors than to explain the errors or provide feeding-forward advice. Educators may also be influenced by their own assumptions about how students feel about feedback. Despite research to the contrary (see Burke 2009; Orsmond et al. 2013), anecdotal evidence suggests that tutors often feel that students are not interested in feedback, that they do not read it, or that they are more interested in their grade (Wojtas 1998). This perceived student indifference towards feedback may consequently affect the quality and quantity of feedback tutors give, as tutors may view it as a wasteful endeavour.

Context and theoretical framework

The specific focus of the article is on feedback given to first year students studying English Studies at a medium sized, historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. Although located in a specific context, the course is a fairly typical university level literature course. English Studies focuses primarily on the engagement with a variety of literary texts, within certain theoretical frameworks and historical contexts, through a close reading of a text (Cromwell 2005; Chick 2009). The underlying aim of the programme, which students may take from undergraduate to postgraduate level, is to create literary scholars. At the specific university in question, the first-year course aims to introduce 'students to a full spectrum of literature written in English … with a strong emphasis developing reading and writing skills appropriate to the study of English' (Department of English Student Handbook 2016, 4).

Yet, as at many other institutions, the nature of English Studies is difficult to explain, especially since it draws on various other discipline such as classics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, history and language (Gooder 2005). Moreover, it is not, in a traditional sense, a study-able module, as there is no set body of knowledge that students must learn for tests, examinations or to become successful in the discipline (Gooder 2005). Instead, it is more about showing evidence of a critical and creative approach to reading and analysing texts; it is about becoming a Literary Scholar. Additionally, it differs from school English, which tends to focus on language, literature and literacy (Macken-Horarik 2011). At university, the primary focus is on literature, with language and literacy development peripheral concerns (at best). As such, students may be confused about what the programme entails.

This confusion may be exacerbated by those who have been entrenched in the discipline – such as the tutors and lecturers – finding it difficult to explain what is needed, as they have mastered the discipline and therefore may not be able to see the inner workings anymore as it has become 'natural' and obvious to them (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006). The role of feedback, therefore, is to make it clearer to students what the discipline entails. Yet, given the context of

larger class sizes and time constraints for feedback and assessment, feedback is often too evaluative. Feedback, in such a context, may then quite easily mislead students about what is valued in the discipline, what they need to achieve, to be, to claim success. It is therefore important to consider *what* feedback message is being conveyed and whether this would enable students to become more successful, knowledgeable, self-aware participants in the discipline.

To make the tacit nature of English Studies more explicit, LCT was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. LCT is an explanatory and analytical framework (Maton 2010, 2014); that is, it provides a toolkit that can both explain various tacit practices, beliefs, etc. and provides ways to analyse those very practices. In short, it is aimed at making 'the invisible visible' (Maton 2016, 17). This makes LCT an especially useful framework for understanding, and analysing, the tacit, difficult-to-access nature of English Studies, as it can make the nature of English Studies more explicit for those who are embedded in the discipline and those who are entering it. In the specific context, LCT can be used to first conceptualise *what* English Studies ultimately values and second to unpack what the feedback in English Studies *should* be focusing on and compare that to what the feedback is focusing on; that is, looking at the difference between the tacit purpose of feedback and the actual practice thereof in order to better understand the nature of the misalignments that exist.

LCT currently consists of five dimensions (Specialization, Semantics, Temporality, Density and Autonomy), but only the dimension Specialization is used in this article. Specialization focuses on 'what makes someone or something different, special, worthy of distinction' (Maton 2010, 44). To conceptualise what makes something special, Specialization works on the principle that all practices consist of two basic aspects: what is valued in a discipline, that is, what is the legitimate knowledge in a field and, and who may be valued in a discipline, that is, who is a legitimate knower in a field (Maton 2014, 2016). These two aspects are then defined as epistemic relations (ER), or what is legitimate knowledge, and social relations (SR), who is a legitimate knower (Maton 2014, 2016). Disciplines and fields will always have both valued knowledge and valued knowers; however, these will not be equal in importance. The relative differences in importance are indicated using plus (+) and minus (−) signs to show that in relation to one, the other is stronger (+) or weaker (−) (Maton 2014, 2016). So, for instance, some fields might emphasise the possession of specialised or technical knowledge and de-emphasise possessing certain knower attributes. This would then be indicated as the field being ER+, SR−, that is having stronger ER, and weaker SR.

Combining the relative strengths and weaknesses of ER and SR creates four specialization codes. These can be plotted out on a Cartesian plane (see Figure 1), and are namely knowledge codes, knower codes, relativist codes and élite codes. Knowledge codes are characterised by an emphasis on having the 'right' kinds of knowledge, while the specific knower attributes are de-emphasised (thus, ER+, SR−). Knower codes, on the other hand, emphasise having the 'right' kinds of attributes over having the right kinds of knowledge (ER−, SR+). There are also specialization codes where specialised knowledge and knower attributes are equally emphasised (élite codes, ER+, SR+), and equally de-emphasised (relativist code, ER−, SR−) (Maton 2014, 2016).

English Studies may be considered a knower code (Christie 2016). Although the field requires specialised knowledge in the form of theoretical knowledge (e.g. about feminism, post-colonialism, etc.) and textual knowledge (e.g. plot details, character names and relations to one another), ultimately what is valued in the discipline is for a student to develop a 'literature mind-set' (Cromwell 2005, 80). It is, for instance, much more important for a student to be able to consider, through a close engagement with the text, how Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* subtly satirises notions of class and propriety than to be able to (re)tell the story. To develop this mind-set, a student needs to be critical, analytical, creative and independent in their thinking of and engagement with a text. These, then, are some of the necessary knower attributes a student needs to develop in English Studies. These attributes may be seen in the student's analysis, as presented in a written essay on a particular text or extract from a text. The essay then, which is

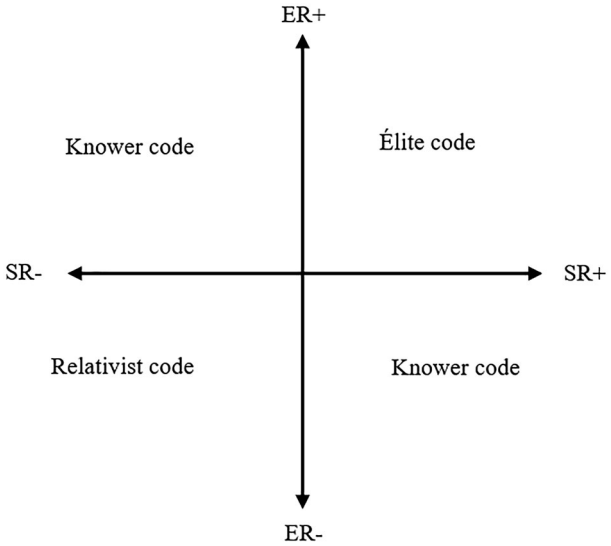

Figure 1. Specialization plane (Maton 2014, 2016).

the sole form of assessment in English Studies, as in many other disciplines (Lillis 2001) is the vehicle through which a student can show her development of these attributes.

Based on this understanding of what English Studies is – a knower code aimed at developing certain knower attributes – we can now conceptualise the full purpose of feedback in English Studies. For feedback to be helpful to students it needs to be geared towards facilitating the development of these required attributes, instead of focusing, for instance, on more mechanistic aspects of essay writing such as structure and grammar. If there is an over-emphasis on these mechanistic aspects, at the expense of knower development, then feedback may, inadvertently, deny access to the workings of a discipline; that is, the practice of feedback will be misaligned with the deeper purpose of the discipline.

Methods

The aim of the article is to determine whether the practice and the purpose of feedback are aligned in English Studies. In order to do so, data were collected from participant tutors. At the beginning of the academic year, all English Studies tutors were approached during the first general meeting. Four tutors (out of a pool of 12) volunteered to take part in the study. The tutors are a combination of postgraduate students and professional tutors, who are employed to run small group tutorial sessions and to grade and give feedback on student writing. Each tutor identified three first year English Studies students (a high achieving one, a mid-range one and a fail, according to criteria set by the departments) and provided anonymised copies of their essays, with students' permission, to the researcher. A total of 65 essays were collected over the course of an academic year. Each student (12 in total) had to submit 5 assignments for the academic year; however, some of the selected students did not submit all their assignments. A total of 962 comments were given by the tutors across all the essays collected.

Ethical clearance (registration no 15/7/52) was obtained from the research ethics committee at the university in question. A consent form was handed out to, and signed by, participating tutors, who followed the same procedure with their students. Additionally, the anonymity of both tutors and students was kept by using pseudonyms. Along with the sample essays, focus group discussion sessions with the participant tutors were conducted; they also completed a

questionnaire and individual interviews. These were used to enhance the actual feedback data with the tutors' views on giving feedback.

Once the participant tutors had provided the student assignments, all the comments from the various assignments were transferred onto an Excel spreadsheet. Data were then analysed in two stages: first, an iterative thematic analysis of the feedback comments, and second, a theoretical analysis of the comments.

Thematic analysis

The comments on the essay were grouped thematically according to an area of the essay that it focused on (for instance, comments that focused on content of the essay, or the structuring of the essay). Once this grouping had been done, the broad feedback categories could be determined. In doing so, the analysis drew on the categories of Brown and Glover (2006) and Hyatt (2005). These categories were a useful starting point but needed to be adjusted to the specific context. Consequently, the analysis drew from the focus group discussions with tutors, in conjunction with these categories, and from this analysis, five broad categories emerged:

- *Content* comments focus on the actual analysis part of the essay and are arguably the most important part of the essay, as this shows how well a student has engaged with the text,
- *Language* comments focus on identifying and correcting spelling and grammar errors,
- *Referencing* comments focus on identifying and correcting errors in referencing, as students must follow the MLA referencing conventions in English Studies,
- *Structure* comments focus on the organisation of the essay (topic sentences, structuring of paragraphs, etc.) and argument (as a reflection of a student's interpretation of the text as framed by the essay question) and
- *Encouragement* comments provided emotional encouragement and support to students.

Some of these categories can be further subdivided into sub-categories. Content comments, for instance, can be divided into comments that focus on 'analysis' by prompting students to deepen their analysis or by seeking evidence (in the form of quotations from the text) to support a claim, and comments that focus on 'knowledge' about the text by asking students to provide more information about the text. These various (sub)categories are summarised in Table 1. For a more detailed breakdown see van Heerden (2018).

Theoretical analysis

Once these broad categories had been identified, they were read through the lens of Specialization. To do so, a translation device had to be created so that the theoretical framework could be applied to the data and vice versa (Maton and Chen 2016). For instance, the theoretical description of ER is that it refers to specialised knowledge. However, what does this mean in practice in the context of written feedback on the English Studies essay? Creating the translation device was therefore needed to 'translate' the theory to the specific context at hand in order to make a theoretical analysis of the comments to see how, or whether, they aligned with the purpose of feedback.

In terms of English Studies, comments that focused specifically on developing knower attributes were classified as SR, as these comments were largely focused on developing the student's voice and focused on aspects such as the strength (or weakness) of their analysis, having an argument, or using sources to synthesise ideas. Comments that focused on technical aspects of essay writing – such as the structure of the piece, language and grammar errors, and getting referencing 'right' – or on identifying errors/gaps in textual knowledge – such as identifying

Table 1. Feedback categories.

Feedback category	Sub-category	Example	Function
Content	Analysis	'Do you think Triton's knowledge separates him from Salgado?' 'Source/evidence?'	Focuses on developing and improving students' analytical abilities by getting students to think beyond what they have already written or by asking students to provide textual evidence for a claim
	Focus	'Does not adequately answer the question'	Indicates how well the student has engaged with the text and/or the essay question
	Knowledge	'Which [bird] – be as specific as possible' 'He sees them fight before'	Asks students to provide additional textual information or indicates that a student has overlooked textual 'facts' and/or misrepresented these
Structure	Organisation	'Does the introduction adequately summarise your three main ideas?'	Focuses on the technical aspects of writing at essay, paragraph and sentence level
	Argument	'The question has told you this. What is your argument?'	Indicates how students have responded to the essay question
Referencing and quoting	n/a	'Be careful of omitting spaces where there should be spaces on the outside of each bracket'	Indicates referencing and quoting conventions
Language	n/a	'signifies' (correcting 'signify')	Identifies and corrects language errors
Encouragement	n/a	'Well done!'	Gives praise/motivation

when a student gets a plot point wrong – were classified as ER. Once these broad theoretical understandings of what constitutes ER and SR in an English Studies context had been formulated, it was possible to move back to the thematic analysis and focus on reading the various subcategories considering this theoretical understanding. From this, the translation device for Specialization was devised (see Table 2).

This translation device was therefore used to distinguish between what the comment says on the surface (the *focus* of the comment) and the underlying purpose of the comment (the *basis*) (Maton 2014, 2016). For instance, a comment like 'what do you think is the significance of [x]?': on the surface (the *focus*) is telling the student to read a little deeper into their analysis. The underlying purpose (the *basis*), however, is to enable the student to develop the necessary knower attribute of analytical and critical reading. This distinction between what a comment says (the *focus*) and what a comment means (the *basis*) enabled the analysis to see whether tutors were making the knower code of the discipline more visible and accessible to students. Table 3 summarises the specialization coding for the various feedback (sub)categories of feedback using the translation device.

Results

As can be seen from Table 3, the feedback in the data set is underpinned by three distinct specialization codes: namely a knower code (ER−, SR+), a knowledge code (ER+, SR−) and a relativist code (ER−, SR−). These can be mapped out on the specialization plane (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows a fairly equal distribution of specialization codes, as there are three feedback categories in the knower code, three in the knowledge code and two in the relativist code. However, considering the actual number of comments of each subcategory, as presented in

Table 2. Translation device for Specialization.

Epistemic relations	
ER+	Comments that privilege possessing the right, or right amounts of, technical or textual knowledge
ER−	Comments that downplay, or even ignore, possessing technical or textual knowledge
Social relations	
SR+	Comments that aim to develop knower attributes either by actively encouraging them or by recognising these attributes in writing
SR−	Comments that downplay, or even ignore, the development of knower attributes

Table 3. Coding of feedback categories.

Feedback category	Sub-category	SR/ER	Specialization code
Content	Analysis	ER−, SR+	knower code
	Focus	ER−, SR−	relativist code
	Knowledge	ER+, SR−	knowledge code
Structure	Organisation	ER+, SR−	knowledge code
	Argument	ER−, SR+	knower code
Referencing and quoting		ER+, SR−	knowledge code
Language		ER−, SR−	relativist code
Encouragement		ER−, SR+	knower code

percentages based on the total number of comments (962), it becomes clear that there are far fewer comments that focus on knower code development (see Figure 3).

From Figure 3, it can be seen that the largest number of comments were focused on identifying and correcting language errors. This is despite the tutors indicating in interviews and focus group sessions that language is not an important aspect of writing that feedback should be focused on. For instance, Jessica (all tutors have pseudonyms) pointed out that 'language is the least important thing at this stage'. Most of the language-related comments were devoted to correcting incorrectly used words (e.g. correcting 'quite' to 'quiet', or 'conscious' to 'conscience') or concord errors (e.g. adding an 's' to a plural verb where needed, or pointing out that a word is missing an 's').

The second largest number of comments was focused on content, and specifically analysis. The importance of content was emphasised by Jane who said that essay content shows that a student 'is trying to engage with it beyond paraphrasing the text. For me this is foundational'. These comments were often phrased as questions to help students think more in-depth about what they have written. For instance, Jane wrote 'What does this tell you about the type of person Triton is becoming?' Content comments focusing on analysis would also point out moments of good analytical insight (e.g. 'very good analysis' (Jessica) and ' A very good, sophisticated analysis' (Cindy)), or would request students to provide more evidence in the form of quotations from the text to substantiate a point (e.g. 'Use evidence to show this' (Jane) and 'Evidence?' (Alex)).

Interestingly, the third highest amount of comments is devoted to identifying and correcting referencing related errors, even though most of the tutors identified referencing as being the least important aspect of writing to focus on. Cindy, for instance, felt that 'it's more a formality and mechanistic element', while Jane felt that it 'is a waste of my time and theirs to focus on'. Comments on referencing focused on giving broad advice on referencing conventions (e.g. 'Please see MLA guidelines for spacing requirements and referencing' (Jessica) and 'Put references AFTER quotations as a general rule' (Alex)) or on correcting referencing-related errors (e.g. 'no need to write "pg", just use the [page] number' (Jane)).

Considering the specialization code *basis* of each comment subcategory, it becomes clear that there are more comments aligned with a relativist code (see Figure 4).

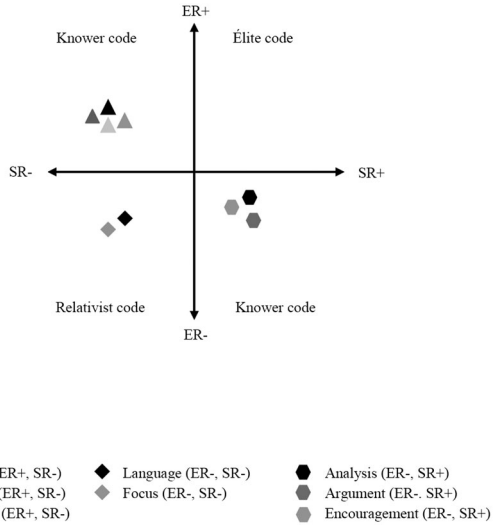

Figure 2. Distribution of feedback comments according to categories across the specialization plane.

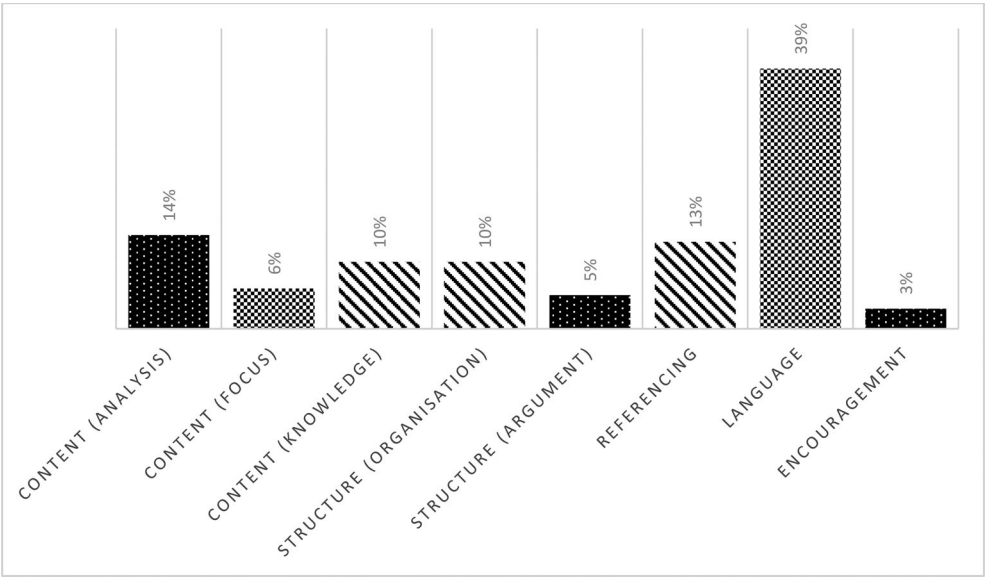

Figure 3. Breakdown of comment subcategories in percentages.

As can be seen from Figure 4, the subcategories of comments that are aligned with the knower code *basis* of the discipline only account for 22% of the total comments, while those aligned with a knowledge code and a relativist code *basis* account for 33% and 45% respectively.

As Figures 2–4 indicate, then, not only is there a clash between the underlying message of each feedback category, but the overall underlying message of the feedback given is aligned with a relativist code (45%). This indicates that the written comments are not really aligned with the knower code *basis* of the discipline. The effect of this is that feedback is aimed at helping develop writing skills in a generic way rather than connecting it with knowerness and the knowledge basis of the discipline.

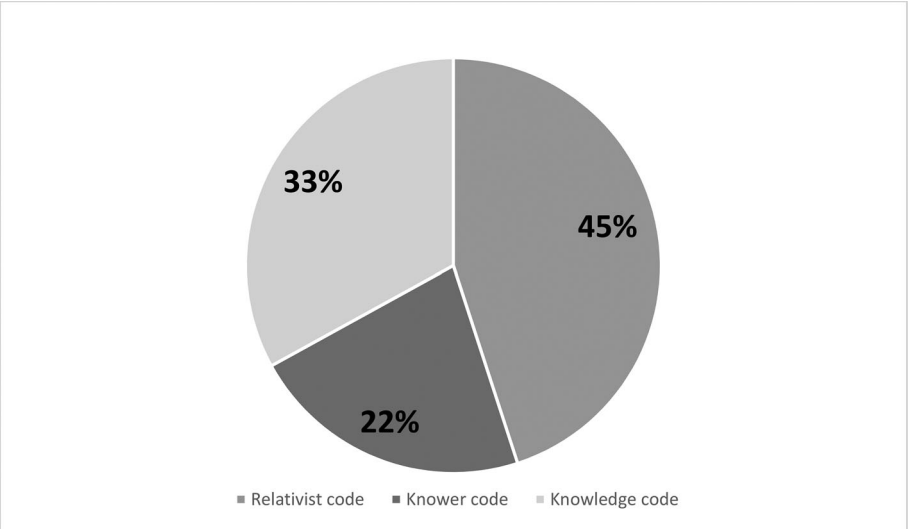

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of specialization codes underlying comments.

Discussion

As can be seen from the results, the practice and purpose of feedback in English Studies are not aligned. There are three main implications of this misalignment of feedback practice and feedback purpose. First, as the comments are underlined by three different codes, they are likely to mislead students about what is truly valued in the discipline. The tutors, for instance, indicated that content is an important aspect of the essay. Alex, for instance, pointed out that the content 'deal[s] with the art of interpretation, critical thinking, analysis of text… which are integral cognitive processes for English Studies'. Other aspects, such as referencing, language and structure are not as important. Yet, their feedback conveys a different message, as students are simultaneously being told that they need to have technically proficient essays, must get all the facts of the story correct, and they should be able to come up with original interpretations of a text. While all three of these are undeniably important, ultimately, being able to develop their own voices and being confident in their stances on a text, is more valued in the discipline (as per the knower code *basis* of the discipline).

Second, the comments that make up the relativist code largely consist of identifying and correcting language errors. This, in itself, is not problematic, as Alex points out that clear language is important for communicating 'ideas logically, persuasively'. However, as Jane indicates, '[t]he irony is that identifying errors is not the most encouraging way to get students to improve'. Despite this, there is an abundance of language-related comments. Furthermore, the message that underscores identifying and correcting language errors is that language correctness is important for the sake of language correctness, thereby disconnecting language from analysis and meaning making. This may suggest to students that if they would only fix all their language and grammar errors then they would do better in the discipline, thereby emphasising writing grammatically sound essays over writing creative, critical essays that express a voice, over and above 'perfect' grammar.

Third, an over-focus on language correctness overlooks an important literacy divide, namely the digital divide. In South Africa, for instance, many students are not computer literate by the time they come to university (Nash 2009; Kajee and Balfour 2011). What might be identified as language errors may instead be typing errors, or an unfamiliarity with basic spell check programs. If students then become more proficient with typing and using spell check, but their marks do not improve, then it indicates that the problem in their writing is not *language*

orientated but something else. Yet, the evaluative nature of feedback underlined by a knowledge code and relativist code *basis* may give the impression that fixing their writing is a straightforward process of correcting errors, when in fact it may require more intensive development.

The developmental nature of feedback may therefore be inaccessible and unfamiliar to students, thereby contributing to it potentially being unhelpful. For developmental feedback to be more helpful and useful, its purpose – in terms of the *focus* and the *basis* – needs to be made more explicit to students for them to act accordingly. If feedback cannot make it clear to students what is valued in the discipline, students might never improve in the ways intended, thereby contributing to both students' and tutors' dissatisfaction with the process, and more vitally, leading to students dropping the programme of study, or struggling to move forward in terms of further study and scholarly development.

Conclusion

The study is relatively small scale, so as to take an in-depth exploratory approach to understand whether the practice and purpose of feedback are aligned. As indicated in the opening sections of the article, there is a global need across higher education for better feedback giving practices, so that although the article is located within a particular context, it is not limited to that context. As Pokorny and Pickford (2010) point out, written feedback is often not as helpful or effective as it could be. This article illustrates one way of potentially improving feedback giving, by using LCT to conceptualise the purpose of the discipline, and therefore of feedback in the discipline, so as to make feedback (more) helpful. This could be especially useful in more tacit disciplines such as those found in the arts and humanities.

A possible way of remedying any feedback misalignment would be to consider feedback as a literacy, as a social practice, imbued with values, practices, ways of being and knowledge (Gee 2012) that need to be developed. One possible avenue would be to work with tutors and lecturers to conceptualise what feedback needs to do and analyse their feedback to see what it is doing. Future studies could therefore examine the effectiveness of developing feedback giving literacy, by better enabling tutors to align the practice of feedback with the purpose of a discipline.

As student numbers and diversity increases, there will be even more time constraints on tutors giving feedback. It is therefore important that what we choose to give feedback on gives the correct message to students, especially if we want to ensure that our feedback does help students. Otherwise, instead of helping students clear away obstacles in the path to success, feedback may become an obstacle in itself.

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