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(How) do written comments feed-forward? A translation device for developing tutors' feedback-giving literacy

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ABSTRACT

In order for feedback to effectively facilitate learning and development, it needs to feed-forward from one assignment to the next. Yet, it is not always clear how to determine if feedback is actually feeding forward. This paper, therefore, presents a translation device, using Legitimation Code Theory, and specifically, semantic gravity, to help tutors better understand whether, and to what extent, their feedback is feeding forward. The aim is to help tutors better develop their feedback-giving literacy.

KEYWORDS

Feedback; higher education; Legitimation Code Theory; tutor development; feed-forward

Introduction

Feedback has been shown to be important for students' learning and development (Price et al., 2011). However, the effectiveness of feedback is largely dependent on whether students have an opportunity to engage with feedback (Crisp, 2007; Taras, 2006). An important aspect of students' engagement with feedback is the extent to which feedback is transferable beyond the context of a current assignment (Crisp, 2007; Wakefield et al., 2014). 'Transferable' in this context refers to how feedback comments can enable cumulative learning (Maton, 2009) by enabling students to learn from the feedback of a particular assignment and have that feed into future assignments and beyond. If feedback is not transferable then it may instead be seen as merely a way to justify a mark, and not as a tool for learning (Rae & Cochrane, 2008), and may result in segmented learning (Maton, 2009), as the feedback is limited to a particular assignment and cannot be used beyond that context. Feedback, therefore, needs to 'feed-forward'. Orsmond et al. (2013) define 'feed-forward' as 'tutor feedback on a completed piece of work [which] can be utilised by the student to inform their efforts in future assessments' (p. 42). Feedback that does not feed into future assignments may be limited in its effectiveness. Feedback needs to produce a change in the future in order for it to be seen as helpful (Hughes et al., 2015).

However, written feedback is often not as effective as it is intended to be (Murtagh & Baker, 2009). On a practical level, the language used in feedback may often 'discourage interaction' (Deyi, 2011, p. 51), either because students do not understand the terminology used in feedback-giving practices, which could limit their ability to engage with the comments, or because the feedback comments are not phrased as advice and instead

merely come across as a list of things a student did not do, thereby limiting the transferability – and importantly the learnability – of feedback. Moreover, students often do not have opportunities to engage with feedback (Taras, 2006). Many assignments are scheduled at the end of the module, term, or semester; writing (multiple) drafts, and thereby learning from and engaging with feedback, is not always possible. As such, feedback has to feed-forward across different assignments. If students lack the necessary feedback literacy to turn feedback into feed-forward for themselves, then students may struggle to learn from feedback (Sutton, 2012). As a result, tutors may find that they keep repeating the same comments (Duncan, 2007), while also being frustrated that students are seemingly not learning from their feedback (Taras, 2006). The struggles with feedback may also be ascribed to course design, as drafts are often not an explicit requirement, thereby limiting students' ability to learn how to engage with and learn from feedback (Taras, 2006).

In contexts where students have limited opportunities for (re)drafting and engaging with feedback, feed-forward is, therefore, a must. Yet, how do we determine whether feedback is feeding forward or is merely feeding back? This paper aims to provide a way to conceptualise and analyse the transferability of feedback comments to aid tutors in developing their own feed-forward feedback-giving literacy. Using Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), and specifically semantic gravity, a translation device for feedback comments is proposed, which could help tutors to analyse their current feedback-giving practices in order to determine if their comments are feeding forward. This translation device could thus assist tutors with developing their necessary feedback-giving literacy. The usefulness of the translation device will be shown through the example of feedback comments that three students received over the duration of an undergraduate semester-long module; using the translation device, these will be analysed to show that what tutors may view as useful, transferable comments, may instead not be so.

Conceptual framework

LCT is a conceptual and analytical framework that aims to make visible that which is invisible (Maton, 2014). For this paper, specifically, I will use Semantics, one of the five Dimensions that currently makes up LCT (the others being Specialisation, Autonomy, Density and Temporality). Semantics conceptualises the context-dependence and complexity of meaning and practices, through semantic gravity and semantic density, respectively (Maton, 2014). For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing solely on semantic gravity, which explores to what extent meaning is dependent on a particular context. That is, the stronger semantic gravity is, the more context-bound meaning is; while the weaker semantic gravity is, the less it is bound to a particular context. We may, therefore, distinguish along a continuum of relatively stronger and weaker semantic gravity (Maton, 2014). The relative differences are indicated using plus and minus signs to indicate stronger semantic gravity (SG+) and weaker semantic gravity (SG-). In applying the theory to the context of the study, the relative semantic gravity of a feedback comment refers to how context-bound, or transferable, a comment is. Comments, for instance, that are bound to a particular context, and which are thus less likely to be transferable, are stronger in semantic gravity, while comments that are less bound to a particular context, and thus more likely to be transferable, are weaker in semantic gravity. Semantic gravity is, therefore, a useful way to conceptualise (and analyse) the

transferability of feedback comments for the purpose of feed-forward along a continuum of likelihood of transferability.

Once these broad conceptualisations of stronger and weaker semantic gravity in relation to feedback comments were established, i.e. less and more likely to be transferred, respectively, a translation device was developed to further and more specifically facilitate the analysis of the data through the lens of semantic gravity. A translation device involves ‘iterative moments between theory and data’ (Maton & Chen, 2016, p. 33) in order to simultaneously adjust the theoretical framework to the data in question and, in turn, to read the data through the theoretical lens. In developing the translation device, and following Maton and Doran’s (2017) model, four subtypes were distinguished based on the feedback comment’s likelihood of being transferable: specific feedback, implied feed-forward, explicit feed-forward and general feedback (see Figure 1).

On the ‘more likely’ end of the continuum, there is generic feedback and explicit feed-forward. Generic feedback refers to general comments such as indicating to a student that they have not formatted the essay in the required way (for example, not using the correct font, font size or line spacing). These kinds of comments are not bound to a particular context but are broadly applicable to general essay writing or technical requirements; however, because they are fairly easy to correct, they are fairly likely to be transferred to another essay. Explicit feed-forward are comments that often originate in the context of a particular essay or error but are framed explicitly as advice. For example, ‘remember, don’t start a paragraph with a quote’. Here the comment originates from the context where the paragraph has been started with a quote, but it is phrased in such a way that it reads as advice for future assignments. In this case, the transferability of the comment is, therefore, more explicit; however, because it requires a more thorough understanding of what needs to be done, it is not as easy, and therefore as likely, to be transferred to other contexts as generic feedback.



SG	Type	Subtype
-   +	More likely	Generic feedback
		Explicit feed-forward
	Less likely	Implicit feed-forward
		Specific feedback

Figure 1. Translation device for the transferability of feedback.

On the 'less likely' end of the continuum are the subtypes specific feedback and implied feed-forward. Specific feedback refers to a comment that is completely bound to a particular assignment or assignment topic, with little to no chance of it being transferred to another context. This often applies to errors which have been corrected without an accompanying explanation or suggestion for future assignments. For instance, changing the incorrectly used 'thought' to 'taught' in a student's essay, without explaining why one word is correct and the other is not, will not necessarily mean that the student will learn the difference between the two. In this case, the comment is therefore merely looking back at what was done wrong with little chance of learning and is situated around a specific error. Implied feed-forward comments originate from a specific error in an essay but are phrased in such a way that it has the *potential* to be used as advice for future assignments, depending on whether and to what extent the student engages with the comment. For example, should a tutor write 'your paragraph needs a clear topic sentence'; the comment is bound to the paragraph and its lack of topic sentence, but underlying the comment is the advice that paragraphs should have a topic sentence. This could, therefore, be transferred to a different context, even though it originates in a specific context; the transferability (the feed-forwardness) of the comment, therefore, is implied.

Ideally, feedback – in order to effectively feed-forward – should be relatively transferable, so as to be useful for students to enable cumulative learning across assignments. Feedback that is too context bound may result in segmented learning (Maton, 2009). Before continuing, it is important to note that although the translation device is a useful way for tutors to conceptualise and analyse their own feedback-giving practices to see if comments are actually feeding forward, this does not absolve students completely. The success and effectiveness of feedback also depend greatly on student engagement with feedback comments. The translation device is merely a way for tutors to ensure that from their side of the feedback dialogue, comments are (more) helpful.

Methods

A small scale, illustrative case study method was employed, in order to provide an in-depth examination of the feedback comments. The case study approach enabled the detailed exploration of the feedback comments, so as to better understand the phenomenon (Yin, 1981). Although the results themselves may not be generalisable to other contexts, the translation device may be applied to other contexts in order to better facilitate the development of effective feedback-giving literacy for tutors and other academic staff by enabling them to better conceptualise and analyse their current practices to determine if there are any problems so as to better these in the future.

In order to illustrate how the translation device may be used, three students' feedback comments, received over the course of one undergraduate first-year, semester-long university module, were analysed. The assignments were provided by their tutors who were voluntarily participating in a larger feedback-related study (Van Heerden, 2020). Although four tutors participated, only two tutors' feedback are reflected here, as the three selected students are fairly representative of the student population broadly: Student A (Dawn) received a constant fail grade, Student B (Bronwyn) received an average grade of 60%, while Student C (Diana) received a constant A-grade for each assignment in

the module. Coursework assessment in the module consisted of four assignments, all of them being essay format. Two essays were written in class under test conditions, while the other two were more 'formal' essays, which had to be typed and submitted. The assignments did not go through a drafting process.

Students signed a consent form, administered by their tutor, which indicated the nature of the study, and that participation was voluntary. Pseudonyms were provided to both tutors and students to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university in question.

In each instance, the comments on the students' essays were first transcribed onto an Excel worksheet. Thereafter, the comments were coded using the translation device. To visually represent the semantic gravity of each student's feedback comments, a semantic gravity profile was used. A semantic gravity profile is a way to indicate how meaning and practices may move between moments of stronger and weaker semantic gravity. In this paper, each comment was plotted along the y-axis (the relative strength of semantic gravity) and the x-axis (chronologically, according to assignment) as dots. The dots were then connected to create a visual approximation of each student's assignment-specific feedback comments. Each student's semantic gravity profile will now be discussed individually.

Results

Student A: Dawn

As can be seen from the profile (Figure 2), Dawn's feedback comments wave in the stronger semantic gravity end of the continuum between general feedback and implied feed-forward (Figure 1) and do not reach the weaker semantic gravity range. This suggests very little overall transferability of comments. Many of the comments she received identified and corrected language errors. A fairly common occurrence is her tutor underlining a language error and/or placing a question mark next to it. For instance, her tutor underlined the phrase 'an unpleasant attempt start of a dialogic love poem [sic]', with

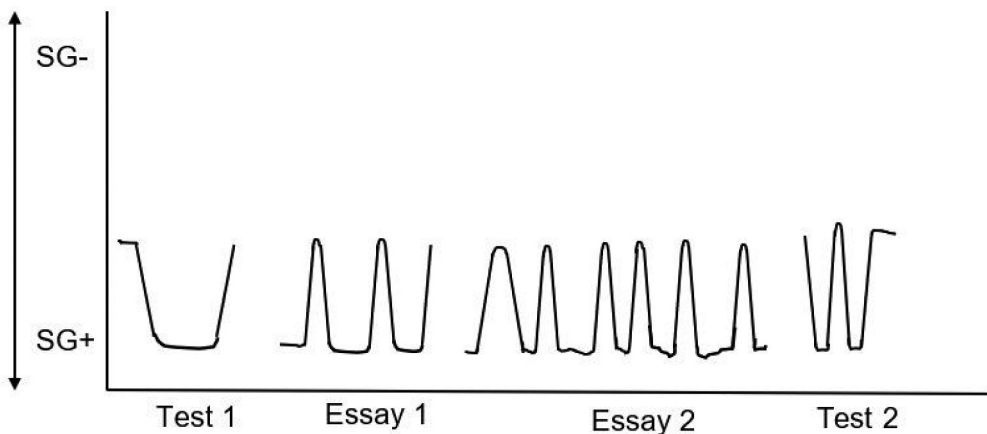


Figure 2. Semantic gravity profile: Dawn.

a question mark next to it (Essay 1; specific feedback). As the specific error has not been explained or clarified in any way, it is unlikely that learning or feed-forward will take place from this specific comment (Walker, 2009).

There are also repeated comments across the assignments. For instance, in all but one, reference is made to answering the question. In Test 1, one of the summative comments at the end of the essay stated, 'focus on answering the question' (implied feed-forward). In Essay 1, the tutor wrote 'not really answering the actual question' (implied feed-forward) at the introduction and 'fails to adequately answer the question' (implied feed-forward) as one of the summative comments at the end. In Essay 2, the tutor also made reference to it twice, first at the introduction, 'answer the question' (implied feed-forward), and then as part of the summative comments at the end 'fails to answer the question' (implied feed-forward). The repeated emphasis on answering the question may indicate the importance of doing so but does not make it clearer why she has not answered the question, or how to ensure that she does answer the question. As a result, Dawn receives the same comments but does not really know how to go about changing things. Price et al. (2011) point out feedback often identifies problem areas but not ways of addressing/overcoming those gaps.

Dawn's semantic gravity profile, therefore, indicates that her feedback is largely context-bound with little to no chance of feedback being transferred to other contexts. As Dawn is a repeating student (at the time, she had failed the module twice), and because it might be difficult to learn from her feedback due to it being relatively context-bound, she is, therefore, likely to fail the module again.

Student B: Bronwyn

Bronwyn's profile (Figure 3) shows slightly more wave-like movements between stronger and weaker semantic gravity, though most of the feedback is still relatively strong in semantic gravity. In contrast to Dawn, who received none, Bronwyn received a few explicit feed-forward comments from her tutor. For instance, her tutor wrote 'You can develop [your contextualisation] by going into slightly more detail about what happened before and after the given extract as pertains to the question' (Essay 2). This comment provides

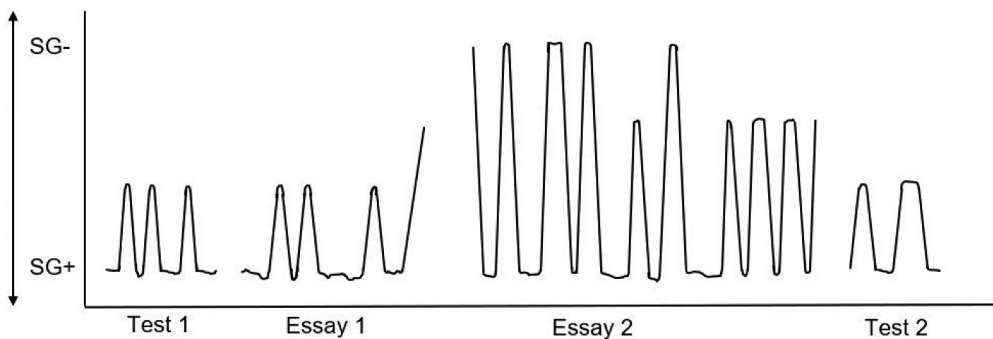


Figure 3. Semantic gravity profile: Bronwyn.

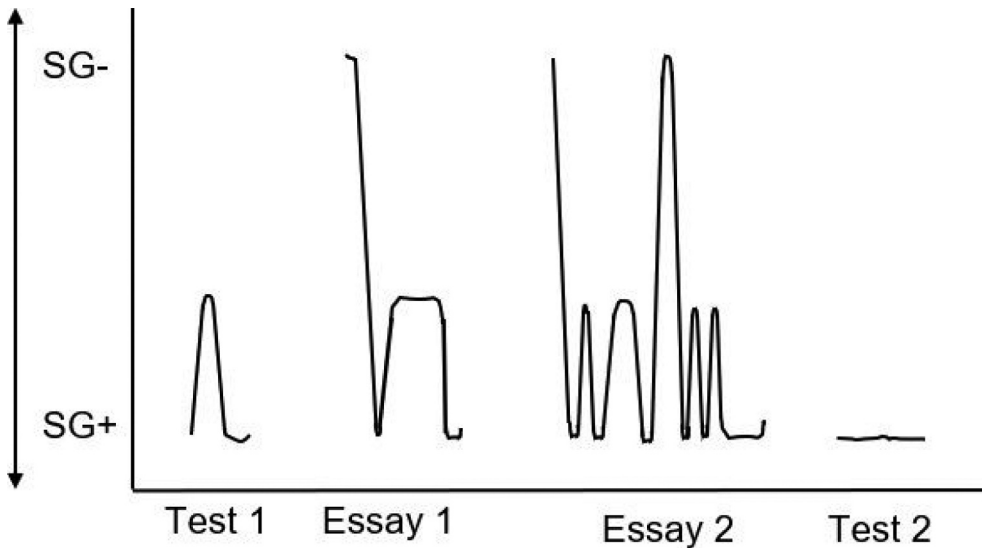


Figure 4. Semantic gravity profile: Diana.

Bronwyn with a tangible piece of advice about contextualising an extract which could be transferred to other similar, extract-based essay contexts.

The generic feedback comments highlighted in the profile (largely in Essay 2) refer to identifying and correcting easy-to-correct quotation mark errors, such as not having the quotation marks match-up or not having spaces between quotation marks and brackets. These are fairly easy to correct and are therefore likely to be transferred to other contexts.

Moreover, Bronwyn also received implicit feed-forward comments. For instance, when her tutor gives praise comments, the tutor specifies exactly what has been done: 'good short topic sentence' (Essay 1) and 'well done on integrating your quotes into full sentences' (Essay 2). Praise comments are often not clear enough to be helpful (Hughes et al., 2015). For Bronwyn, however, her tutor is specific about what she has done well, so that although the comments may originate from a particular context, they are not limited to that context, thereby suggesting that they could be transferred to other contexts as it is easier to understand what has been done well.

Overall, though, Bronwyn's semantic gravity profile suggests that although there are comments that might suggest feed-forward, on the whole, her feedback is largely context-bound.

Student C: Diana

The first thing to note is that Diana's profile (Figure 4), both in terms of the individual assignments, and overall, is much shorter than the others', as she received significantly fewer comments than the other students. Yet, her marks were consistently higher. From the semantic gravity profile, the feedback falls largely in the stronger semantic gravity range. When the profile moves into weaker semantic gravity, it refers to referencing errors. For instance, her tutor added an extra quotation mark to the title of the poem (that is, instead of a single quotation mark, it should be double). These kinds of comments are

easily correctable and therefore easily transferable to other contexts (thus, general feedback). However, the majority of the comments she received are praise comments. For instance, 'A very good engagement' (Test 1); 'Well done!' (Test 1); 'A very good, sophisticated analysis' (Essay 1). As Hughes et al. (2015) point out, praise comments on their own are not particularly helpful, unless it is clear what is being praised. In Diana's case, although she knows she has produced a 'sophisticated analysis' the comment does not elaborate on why or how it is a sophisticated analysis. This is different from Bronwyn, where her tutor was more specific in the praise so as to potentially make it more transferable. Even though Diana is doing better grades-wise, she is in a similar situation to Dawn, as her feedback comments do not necessarily enable her to improve her writing (the assumption possibly being that her writing is already good enough).

Discussion

In general, research has focused on the need for helping students develop their feedback literacy by enabling them to better understand and make use of the feedback provided (Burke, 2009; Sutton, 2012). The assumption often underlying this is that once this is done, students will be able to better learn from their feedback. However, as the semantic profiles show, it may be the feedback itself that is problematic, and not necessarily the students.

From the semantic gravity profiles above, it can be seen that the students' comments were largely context bound with little to no likelihood of transferability. Yet, the tutors themselves indicated that they felt that their comments were fairly useful. For instance, Cindy (Dawn and Diana's tutor) stated that 'generally speaking, students fail to carry over the feedback from one assignment to the next', while Alex (Bronwyn's tutor) said that 'I have seen very little evidence of engagement with my feedback'. This perhaps points to a fairly common scenario, where tutors feel that their feedback is useful and transferable across contexts, because, as the givers of the feedback, they know what should be done with the feedback (Burke, 2009; Crisp, 2007; Deyi, 2011). However, as the semantic gravity profiles show, the actual comments, regardless of how the tutors perceive them, may be too context bound to enable cumulative learning for the students. So, in contrast to anecdotal evidence that suggests that students are not interested in learning from feedback (Duncan, 2007), it may be that the feedback itself does not enable learning across assignments.

The translation device is, therefore, a potentially useful way to enable tutors to better develop the ability to give feedback that feeds forward, as it could help them to first determine the context-dependence of their feedback as is (and thusly whether students can learn from their feedback) and secondly adjust their feedback if necessary. Feed-forward is challenging; increasing numbers of students means less time for detailed feedback and it is generally more difficult to give than feedback (Hughes et al., 2015). However, as Vardi (2012) points out, 'feedback does not need to be copious; just carefully targeted' (pp. 176–177). Additionally, since drafts are not always a requirement in assignments (Taras, 2006) and since feedback is more helpful in the drafting stage (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010), it is important that tutors develop the ability to best give feedback that feeds forward, and not just back. The translation device could assist by giving a visual approximation of their feedback and could, therefore, assist in developing tutor's

feedback-giving literacy, which has generally been an underdeveloped area of tutor development.

Moreover, the translation device also contributes to the growing field of LCT, which has been used in a range of contexts (Maton, 2014). This paper indicates, specifically, how semantic gravity could be applied to the context of feedback, thereby adding to the growing practical application of the theory. Future studies could focus on applying the translation device in other contexts, as well as actively using it as part of tutor development programmes to better develop feedback-giving literacy. Another aspect to consider, but which was beyond the scope of the current paper, is the ease of implementing comments. Comments that are easy to implement – general feedback – may be more likely transferable to other assignment contexts. Yet, these comments, as Bronwyn's and Diana's examples show, may be about generic and/or technical essay writing issues, which is not necessarily aligned with the disciplinary requirements (Van Heerden, 2020). Balancing easy-to-implement and disciplinary-relevant feedback needs to be explored in-depth, especially if the aim is to move feedback towards making disciplinary requirements accessible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Martina van Heerden is an English for Educational Development lecturer at the University of the Western Cape; she teaches academic literacies to students in the Law, Community and Health Sciences, and Science Faculty. Her research interests include feedback, academic literacies, academic development, and peer review.

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