

# Critical Discourse Analysis of Student Responses to Teacher Feedback on Student Writing

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This study explores student written responses to teacher feedback and analyzes these responses through the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Drawing on CDA, we examined the structural, interactional, and interdiscursive features of 21 students' paragraph-length comments on formative teacher feedback on their first assignment draft in a first-year composition class and investigated relations between the text, interaction, and context. The structural analysis indicates that the students' comments demonstrate their emerging academic literacy skills. Our interactional analysis shows that most students took on an active role as a good student and a hardworking writer, but some students exerted their agency by taking the opportunity to resist the authority of the teacher, while others rejected it altogether. Our interdiscursive analysis illustrates that students used not only language from the teacher's comments, but also metalanguage of the composition classroom to formulate their responses. Based on our findings, we discuss implications for teaching practices and future avenues for research on students' responses to teacher feedback.

*Keywords:* critical discourse analysis; feedback; student response; teacher-written commentary; academic literacy

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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, approaches to teaching composition have continuously changed to reflect developments in composition and rhetoric. Although there have been major shifts in writing pedagogy, Ferris (1995) points out that teacher feedback has always remained a crucial part of writing instruction. Teacher feedback imparts direct teaching to individual students, thereby allowing students to understand their own strengths and weaknesses in writing. As such, teacher feedback provides a means for students' revision and future work, and also plays an important role in students' development of autonomy as writers (Fife & O'Neill, 2001). In addition to the influence it has on students' writing development, producing written commentary on students' writing is one of the most time-consuming and challenging tasks for composition teachers (Stern & Solomon, 2006). As the feedback process requires teachers' commitment and investment in time, teachers and scholars in composition have continuously questioned ways teachers can provide effective and constructive feedback on students' writing.

Meeting students' feedback needs is a step toward establishing a student-teacher relationship that fosters students' development in the writing classroom and their agency as writers. With the goal of establishing a dialogue to facilitate their academic socialization, this study observes the expression of students' identities and positionings in the revision process and the workings of power dynamics in feedback practices. We examine the paragraph-length written comments of 21 students as they responded to their teacher's formative feedback on an assignment draft in a first-year composition (FYC) class. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), we analyze the structural, interactional, and interdiscursive choices students make in establishing their role as developing academic writers. Focusing on students' direct written responses to teacher feedback has provided a microperspective on students' perceptions of teacher feedback, and employing CDA as our framework has facilitated the analysis of student and writer identity and further identification of power in the writing classroom. The use of CDA fills a gap in the existing literature on power and identity in response research. Implications for teaching include ways that

teachers can establish a dialogue with students about their writing so as to encourage and develop students' metacognitive practices and promote their authorial identities.

### Literature Review

To identify how teachers can provide effective and constructive feedback, scholars in the field of composition studies have mainly examined two aspects of teacher feedback: the nature of the feedback, and students' response to the feedback. First, researchers have identified and described patterns of teacher commentary. By collecting a large number of teacher comments, researchers have classified the teacher feedback types and made suggestions on teachers' feedback practices (e.g., Connors & Lunsford, 1988, 1993; Lunsford & Straub, 2006; Searle & Dillon, 1980; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1999; Stern & Solomon, 2006). Searle and Dillon (1980) found that teachers respond overwhelmingly to form rather than content. Teacher response typically either evaluated the writing's grammar and mechanics, or used comments as a form of instruction to correct mechanical errors. In a large-scale study that examined 3,000 teacher-marked papers, Connors and Lunsford (1988) also found that among teachers of American college freshmen and sophomores, the most common type of response was correcting spelling errors. In their follow-up study, Connors and Lunsford (1993) analyzed the same set of papers from their previous studies and examined the global comments made by teachers. The findings of the study illustrate that most teachers (77%) provided comments that included global and rhetorical comments, and the most common type of global comments (42%) began positively and then shifted to negative ones. Stern and Solomon (2006) attempted to replicate Connors and Lunsford's (1993) study, but examined teacher-marked papers from across the disciplines. The study identified that more than half of the papers (61%) had a comment that addressed the overall quality of the paper and many of them functioned as justification of students' grades. Understanding teachers' feedback practices more broadly offers us a window into students' potential prior knowledge and experiences with the writing and revision process.

Another approach has explored the effects of teacher feedback by soliciting students' perceptions of and preferences for teacher comments.

The studies in this area have used a variety of methodological approaches to better understand students' reactions to teachers' written commentary. Some researchers used a large-scale questionnaire to investigate students' general preferences on types of teacher comments. Based on a survey of 154 basic writers, Lynch and Klemans (1978) suggested that effective comments are detailed, clear, factual, and positive. Straub (1997) similarly examined a 40-item questionnaire to investigate first-year college students' reactions to variables of teacher response and found that students equally favored comments on both global and local matters. While students preferred elaborated comments, they did not like comments that seemed to be controlling their writing. Treglia (2008) collected qualitative data by interviewing two first-year composition instructors and their 14 L1 and L2 students to explore students' responses to the teachers' written comments. Students in this study found comments to be helpful when they provided specific suggestions, acknowledged their writing, and gave choices for revising. Other researchers used think-aloud methods and asked students to verbalize their responses to capture their initial reactions to teacher feedback (Hayes & Daiker, 1984; Scrocco, 2012; Still & Koerber, 2010). Using think-aloud methods, Scrocco (2012) argues that closed remarks that direct students to make particular changes can impede students from actively engaging in their writing process, and she further emphasizes the importance of teachers offering conversational feedback. Despite the varying methods of examining students' response to teacher feedback, the existing studies show consistent findings: students prefer comments when they are clear and provide specific suggestions without directing them to make particular changes.

The previous studies on teacher feedback have enhanced our understanding of patterns in teacher comments and students' perceptions of teacher feedback. However, feedback studies in the field of composition have paid limited attention to students' negotiation of power and identity and have rarely used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to account for students' engagement with a feedback practice. In those studies in which power issues in teacher feedback have been mentioned, power was treated as a static concept in the recognition of a power mismatch between teacher and students (Stern & Solomon, 2006; Straub, 1997). The

limitation of this perspective is that it positions students as passive recipients of power and does not conceive of them as active agents who can negotiate power and identity and develop autonomy as writers. Richardson (2000) drew on Foucault's complex notion of power as a way to understand students' perception of teacher feedback in a portfolio classroom. However, the study investigated the impact of power on students' portfolio revision process rather than examining the ways students negotiate their power and identity in feedback practices. Few studies to date have examined how students negotiate power and identity in the feedback process. Sutton and Gill (2010) interviewed 21 students in England and Scotland to examine students' understanding of and values regarding feedback, the ways in which tutor and student identities affect feedback practices, and the relationship between power/knowledge and students' engagement with feedback practices. Drawing on CDA as we do, their study provides useful insight on how power and identity affect feedback practices in general, but the study does not analyze direct written responses to teacher feedback on a specific writing assignment. In contrast, our study examines a written form in which students negotiate power and identity through the feedback practices on a particular essay in a first-year composition class. Our study further differentiates itself in that it extends beyond the content analysis common to feedback studies by using a CDA approach to explore the ways in which students express their written feedback on teacher comments. While a content analysis is a direct way of examining students' reactions to teacher feedback, students' perception of responses has rarely been examined from a microscopic perspective such as by analyzing the structure of students' responses, word choices, and other linguistic strategies in their responses. Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates (2001) argue that examining discourse is to study "human meaning-making" (p. 3) and that it leads to "discovery and theorization of pattern and order" (p. 5). In this sense, examining student discourse on teacher feedback provides the potential for learning more about students' perceptions of teacher feedback.

To address these research gaps in teacher feedback studies, we collected data in the form of 21 first-year students' written reactions to teacher comments on their first assignment draft as part of the revision process in a first-year composition course with portfolio assessment. We use the term student

written response to teacher feedback to describe the paragraph-length responses that students wrote in the dialogue box of an electronic course management system in response to a prompt their instructor gave them when their papers were returned with formative feedback. The prompt solicited students' written comments on the instructor's comments (cf. Methodology and Data Analysis below). Upon electronic submission of their comments, students earned points toward their participation grade for completing the task. Here we analyze the structural, interactional, and interdiscursive features of the students' comments using Fairclough's (2001) analytical framework for CDA. This study also draws from composition studies as well as Foucauldian and Bakhtinian perspectives. In what follows, we discuss the theoretical orientation of the study as well as the concepts of discourse, power, and identity. The section after that presents our findings and we conclude with implications for teaching and feedback practices.

## Theoretical Background

The theoretical orientation framing this study is critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. According to Fairclough (2010), CDA aims to uncover relationships between language, society, ideology, politics, and culture through focusing on language. Because language is seen as a part of society, a social process (both production and interpretation), and a socially conditioned process, analyzing discourse is not merely analyzing the discourse itself. Rather, it is to analyze the dialectic relation between language and social reality (Fairclough, 2010). With its sensitivity to power and ideology, CDA provides ways to approach injustice and unequal distribution of power by studying forms of language. Specifically, CDA can contribute to the field of rhetoric and composition by providing a "repertoire of precise, context-specific tools" that can be used to interrogate power and ideology and assess pedagogy in the composition classroom and beyond (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012, p. 110). Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak (2011) summarize the main tenets of CDA, which include the following: (a) Power relations are

discursive, (b) Discourse constitutes society and culture, (c) Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory, and (d) Discourse is a form of social interaction (pp. 258–284).

Fairclough's (1992, 2001) analytical framework reflects the three dimensions of discourse (text, interaction, and context) and aims to examine relations between them (see Figure 1). The three dimensions of CDA are (1) description of spoken or written language text, (2) interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction (the process of text production and consumption), and (3) explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context.

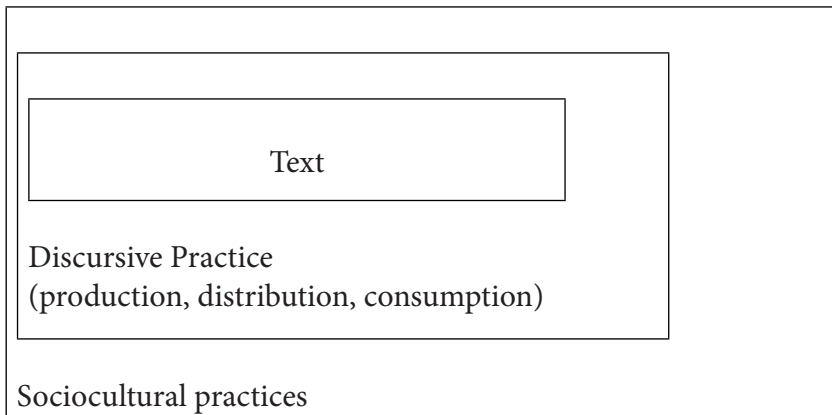


Figure 1. Fairclough's (1992, p. 73) three-dimensional conception of discourse

The first stage is analyzing text, which involves analyzing linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures. The second stage is examining text production and consumption, and power relations involved in this process. Finally, the third stage analyzes intertextual relations between texts, focusing on how external factors affect the text under examination.

### **Discourse, Power, and Identity**

This study draws on Bakhtin's (1982) dialogic principles, which are centered on the co-construction of discourses. Dialogic principles recognize a multiplicity of perspectives and voices, and discourse is seen

as endless and unfinalizable because it constantly interacts and engages with other works and voices. Central to the notion is the concept of heteroglossia, which is the “base condition . . . [that] insures the primacy of context over text” (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 263). Bakhtin (1982) points out that “At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (p. 263). This means that because text or language does not have a fixed meaning, it has to be understood within its social, historical, and cultural contexts. In Bakhtin’s (1982) view, language is a site of struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces, the former being authoritative, centralizing discourses, and the latter being diversifying, often internal discourses. The prompt in this study asked students to document what Bakhtin calls students’ “inner speech” by describing their personal dialogue about their writing. In this way, students could “actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 173). Their own learning, then, entails negotiating language as a site of struggle in the process of understanding their writing progress. The students’ language reflects dialogicality, or “ventriloquation,” in which their responses evoke and invoke the voices of others, namely their present and past teachers, as well as the social and pedagogical practices of the writing classroom.

In understanding power, we adapt Foucault’s (1995) notion of power. He conceives that power exists everywhere and unequal power relations are constantly reinforced through the institutions, including the educational system. In that sense, classroom discourse is an example that reflects and reinforces differences in social status and authority between teachers and students (Carlsen, 1991). In a composition class, a teacher’s comments on a student paper are one of the principal means of exercising power (Smith, 1997). In this case, the instructor exerts power by asking students to write about her comments, giving them a due date for the assignment, and including it as a part of their participation grade. Although the teacher retains the authority in the class, power is not a commodity or a possession of an individual or a group (Foucault, 1995). Rather, it



circulates and is exercised through a net-like organization, which means that students can hold a kind of power over the teacher by commenting on her comments. From this perspective, examining students' responses to the teacher's comments allows us to explore the power relations between the teacher and students.

In this article, we see identity to be socially constructed (McNamara, 1997) and embedded within power relations (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2004). Identity is our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world (Ivanic, 1998; Norton, 2013; Kanno, 2003). We negotiate our sense of self through language within and across different sites at different points in time, and we gain or are denied access to social capital through language (Norton, 2013). In other words, language is not a neutral means of communication, but it is through language that writers position themselves. In much the same way, we turn to students' written responses to teacher feedback to gauge students' positionings.

### **Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to better understand student written responses to teacher feedback and to examine discourse in the context of the social practices surrounding it; namely, revision of student papers and students' demonstration of the metacognitive processes involved in that revision. The research questions addressed were as follows:

1. How do students respond when the teacher requests a written response to the teacher's formative feedback on draft writing in a FYC course?
2. What textual characteristics do student written responses to teacher feedback have?
3. How do students negotiate identity and power through their written responses to teacher feedback?

### **Methodology and Data Analysis**

The data for this study were collected in a FYC composition course in a large public research university in the Northwest. Students are required to take courses to fulfill their composition credits in order to graduate.

This FYC class is an expository writing class that many first-year students take to satisfy this requirement, with varying levels of enthusiasm toward the writing process, the course goals, and writing in general. A network of practices in the FYC class aids students in reaching the course goals: students submit drafts of papers, some of which have been first reviewed by their peers, and instructors offer formative feedback on the writing, which will ultimately be revised for the final course portfolio. Serving as a reader reaction and an opportunity for specific instruction, the feedback is oriented toward helping student writers improve their work to better fulfill a set of course outcomes. In the last weeks of the course, students select their best work and make an argument in their final portfolio as to how the compiled work fulfills the outcomes.

The students' first assignment that was eligible for revision and inclusion in their final portfolios was a two- to three-page claim-based argument about Paulo Freire's "The 'Banking' Concept of Education." The instructor wrote comments on the submission of their first draft of the assignment and requested feedback from students on the comments. While students had posted shorter responses to the course readings on a course discussion board, this comment exchange was the first one to take place on a portfolio-eligible assignment. Our data consist of the prompt soliciting comments on the teacher's formative feedback, accompanied by the written responses of 21 students. The students wrote their responses to teacher feedback as part of their course tasks from the following prompt:

As part of your participation grade, you are asked to comment on my comments. In a short paragraph, please respond by describing (1) what you understood as the main areas for revision, (2) any comments that you did not understand, and (3) anything that you found particularly helpful and would like to see more of. Please post your comment in the comment box (not as an attachment) of this draft within a week of receiving my comments draft.

Students typed their comments in a dialogue box found in the submission box in the course management system.

The second author collected the data as part of students' assignments in the FYC class, and received consent from students to use their coursework for instructional, training, or research purposes. The participants in the study were primarily L1 English writers or writers who had spent the majority of their schooling in English-medium instruction in the United States. Participants were selected by convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), as all participants were enrolled in a FYC course taught by the second author. The students were 18- to 19-years-old, and 12 were female and 9 male. We assigned each of the 21 students a pseudonym to protect their privacy. After the quarter was over, we examined the data—students' first step in processing teacher comments from the locus of students' choices made in their comments on teacher feedback. We identified patterns at the textual and conceptual levels in what Merriam and Tisdell (2015) might consider "researcher-generated documents" and compared the preliminary findings with the second author's observations about students and their writing from the class (p. 163). Both authors contributed to the data analysis and writing of this article.

We acknowledge that the prompt itself may have constrained students' responses. There is some doubt as to whether the students could actually say what they wanted to say within the parameters of the prompt because it specifically asked them to respond to three points. In the prompt, however, the teacher covertly provided room for suggestions and criticism, as the second part of the prompt asked students to describe "any" comments that were unclear. It is assumed that most comments were clear, but students were invited to talk about their concerns. The students could also describe "anything that they would like to see more of," which allows students to make requests to meet their needs. We recognize that students' responses might also have been affected by the pressure of grades; they were to receive points from their responses, which may have influenced how they responded. In order to get those points, however, students had to turn in their drafts to first receive instructor comments, thereby reinforcing the steps involved in drafting and revising.

The prompt asked students to respond to the feedback in an academic way by recontextualizing their teacher's comments. Students were required

to demonstrate their knowledge of writing by describing the key points for revision in point one. Point two allows for the self-positioning of the student as the response is subject to the student's interpretation of the word "understand." Some students might read this point as an invitation to ask questions about the meaning of a comment, or to disagree with a comment, or to offer negative feedback of some kind. Similarly, point three asks the student to perform a socially constructed role by offering positive feedback about the comments. Given that the points were numbered, we could expect a list of points in response, even though the prompt requested a response in paragraph form.

## Findings

### *Structural Analysis*

In this section, in an attempt to situate students' responding practices in their rhetorical setting and judge the effectiveness of teacher comments, we explore student responses to teacher feedback on student writing and discuss the range of options from which students chose to structure their comments. All the students who submitted their comments, except for two, were trying to apply and demonstrate what they learned in the composition class as a new member of the academic community. Since the comments counted as part of their participation grade, students understood this as a task to be given the same thought and rhetorical considerations as their other assignments. As such, students usually wrote a paragraph to address the three questions posed in the prompt. Six students wrote two or three paragraphs, and structured their response like an essay, with the last paragraph generally functioning as a conclusion. The last paragraph included global comments confirming the usefulness of the teacher comments. In all cases, the students strived to display their understanding of the task as part of their work in the composition class.

Students used an academic tone throughout the writing, which may have been an indication of the seriousness of their response, or a routinized reaction to academic writing that is assigned a grade. Only two students deviated from the pattern. Michael used a numbered list in both comments to respond to all the questions, but half of his comments were one sentence,

making the response an outlier for its form and its brevity. Ryan used a personal letter form, and his comments started with “Dear [Instructor’s First Name]” and ended with his full name. Although he did not address the teacher with a formal title, he showed his formality by using his full name in his comments.

We speculate that the prompt guided the order of topics covered in the students’ responses. Students were first asked to write what they understood as the main areas of revision and then discuss any comments they did not understand. As expected, many of the comments did begin with their understanding of the main areas for revision, and none of the comments began with what they did not understand about the comment. Another strong influence on their response order might be the generic conventions of comments. Smith (1997), in her study of end comments, argues that teachers are pressured to follow the convention to begin with positive comments. The students probably have seen many teacher comments throughout their education, and might be producing a similar pattern. The common phrase “I understand that . . .” was followed by the specific details and examples in their papers.

The linguistic strategies that students used to answer parts two and three of the prompt were remarkably different from each other. When students made positive comments on teacher comments, they used a range of different words and phrases to describe the usefulness of the comments they received. Table 1 shows the frequency of all the words and phrases that were used to explain their opinions. The word “helpful” was used most frequently and was often combined with adverbs emphasizing the degree of helpfulness.

Table 1

*Word Choices that Described the Effectiveness of Teacher Feedback*

Positive comments	Instances	Positive comments	Instances
helped/helpful	10	like/liked	4
very helpful	10	really like	1
really helpful	4	really enjoyed	1
particularly helpful	3	pleased	1
most helpful	2	informative	1
pretty helpful	1	clear	1
considerably helpful	1	pretty clear	1
extremely helpful	1	not ambiguous and direct	1
particularly useful	1	made sense	1
nice to read	1	self-explanatory	1

While students explicitly wrote how helpful the teacher's comments were, most preferred to hedge or use implicit sentences when they wrote about the comments they didn't understand. Daniel used "a bit" to soften his statement: "I was a bit confused . . ." Nicole used an interrogative instead of a declarative sentence: "Was this comment asking for me to directly reference Fish (a course text) or was it mostly because it wouldn't be something Fish says?" Similarly, Sarah wrote, "The only thing that I am unsure of is if you felt I incorporated Fish into my essay sufficiently." She emphasized that this was "the only thing" that she was "unsure" about, which implies that other comments were clear. It is interesting to note the subject that they used for this sentence. The students could have said, "Your comments were not clear in place A." Instead, Daniel and Sarah took responsibility for not understanding, and Nicole asked whether "this comment" meant what she thought it did. However, two students chose to write directly about the comments that were vague to them. Ryan wrote, "One of the comments that I did not understand . . ." and Amanda wrote, "I don't understand which direction you want me to go with this particular sentence." Students displayed a range of different strategies to address their lack of understanding or concerns about clarity in the comments. Yet, the traits that emerge from our structural analysis on the whole point to students' use of

teacher-like strategies in the order and organization as well as the tone of their responses. Students directly stated what was clear to them, and for the most part, softened the blame for comments they did not understand. By using teacher-like strategies, students not only demonstrate their familiarity with conventions of teacher comments such as hedging and indirect critiques, but they also highlight their willingness to speak up about their concerns for the next steps in their writing.

### *Interactional Analysis*

**Good student identity in student comments.** In writing for the teacher's comments, many students constructed their identity as a good student for the teacher. All the students except Michael used "I" as the subject in their comments, reflecting the fact that they are taking responsibility for their work. Especially in responding to point number one, some students used the assignment not only to show their knowledge of writing, but also as a place to show their good student identity. Students stated, "I need to clarify . . .," "I realized that . . .," "The main area for revision that I need to make is . . .," "I understood that I need to strengthen my argument . . .," to list just a few. They used "I" to show their acknowledgement of their active role as a student and writer. The students asserted that they understood the comments and that they themselves would change their papers based on the teacher's suggestions. However, Michael, who used a numbered list, omitted the subject of the action by using a command form: "Strengthen the claim to encompass more while making the introduction more concise." Through use of an imperative form, he acknowledged his plan to carry out the suggestions. Sarah interestingly deviated from the pattern that most students followed in order to show her good student identity. She organized the first paragraph about the comments from a writing center on campus and the second paragraph about those from the teacher. Given the fact that the students were only asked to respond to the teacher's comments, we surmise that Sarah wanted to show her devotion to the revision process and her investment in the paper.

Constructing a good student identity may not necessarily represent agreement with the teacher's comments, even if most students show that they agreed with the teacher and they found the teacher comments to be very useful. Kayla even refers to the helpfulness of the comments twice in a

short paragraph. First, she wrote “comments are helpful” and she reiterated that thought in the next sentence, saying, “Once again, I like having you point out what is weakening my argument so that I can better my paper in a revision.” In contrast, Amanda justified her writing and questioned the teacher’s comments on her paper. One of the teacher’s comments suggested that she include an explicit statement, and she responded, “I was confused with this critique, for a few sentences earlier in the paragraph I had stated that because . . .” She did not agree with the teacher, but she wanted to clarify the reason behind the comment so as to improve the quality of her paper. Among the students’ feedback, Amanda’s two comments were significantly longer than the others. She was actively engaged in the writing and revision process, and took this as an opportunity to develop her writing. In sum, students displayed their identity as good students with various strategies.

**Power relations between the teacher and student.** Many students used this response as an opportunity to respect or not respect the teacher’s self-positioning as an authority figure. For example, Ryan started off, “I also *agree* that . . .” The verb “agree” empowers Ryan as someone who can judge the value of the teacher’s comments and make an equal argument. He went on to write, “What benefits would that (the teacher’s proposed change) give my paper?” His linguistic choices show that he does not regard the teacher’s comments as an absolute command. He establishes the position of the teacher as a collaborator who can exchange feedback, and he is the one to make the final decisions on the changes to his paper. Straub (2000) argues that the teacher’s role as a collaborator, facilitator, and mentor achieves a good balance of power in a composition class. Ryan was not alone in using this particular strategy, as approximately one-third of the students used the verb “agree” in a similar manner, thus reinforcing students’ willingness to exert their agency.

Another student, Alex, also questioned the validity of the teachers’ comments and the revision process, yet with a different motivation. He wrote, “I understood the comments fairly well, it’s just following them may be difficult.” He fulfills his task by saying he understood the teacher’s comments, but he doubts how practical the comments are to integrate them in his paper. He avoided recontextualizing the comments or using the shared language of the outcomes perhaps because he did not want to follow the comments. “Following them” suggests his understanding of



comments as a directive, which he seemed to want to resist. At this stage in the course, he was not interested in doing revision of his work, as he had mentioned in a later conference with his teacher. Alex may be resisting the power from the educational institution, which is delivered by the teacher, and thus further challenges the value of the revision process.

The students positioned themselves using a variety of nouns to refer to themselves, the teacher, and the authors of the class readings. The term *writer* was reserved for references to the scholars who wrote the texts chosen for the class readings, as none of the students used the term self-referentially. Nevertheless, students did adopt a writerly role in explicit and implicit ways. By referring to herself as an “author,” Amanda asserted her identity and agency in both comments: “Since I am the author of my essay . . .” and “As an author . . .” She explicitly sets up her identity in opposition to the reader and takes on authorial power. Other students also represented themselves as authors indirectly by making reference to the reader. In fact, eleven out of the nineteen students who commented made a reference to another person without assigning that other person more authority than the “authors” themselves. While they made assumptions about what their readers might know and understand about their work, they did not assign the reader “expert” status. In particular, two students equalized the power with their reader by distancing themselves from the teacher. Emily wrote, “I can see more clearly where a lot of things didn’t flow well or didn’t make sense to *someone else* who was reading it.” Kevin also wrote, “I really find it helpful when *people* make sure my sentences are clear and add ideas that I can include in my paper.” These word choices locate them as students who wrote a paper, and the teacher as one of the people who read their paper. This serves to equalize the power in the student-teacher relationship by not establishing the teacher as an authority who has more knowledge than they do.

### ***Interdiscursive Analysis***

In our data, the students responded to centripetal forces in the Bakhtinian sense when they answered part one of the prompt about the main areas for revision in their papers. The second part of the prompt opened the door for students’ own interpretations of the teacher comments, since this is where they were indirectly invited to critique the comments.

Several students parroted the teacher's commenting voice. In her comments, the instructor referred to what the students did well by making a declarative statement using second person pronouns and a verb in the present tense (e.g., "You raise a valid point that . . ."). Then, in their responses, students changed the verb tense, but still made reference to how the comments function by saying "you commented that . . ." or "you mentioned that . . ." or "you showed me how . . ." Furthermore, in an attempt to familiarize students with the metalanguage of argument writing, the instructor introduced this language in class and drew from it in giving feedback. The students, in turn, mirrored that language in their comments. For instance, in his response to the first short paper, Kevin stated, "I need to vary the lengths of my sentences and recognize sentences in the body paragraphs that do not support my sub-claims." The first clause in this statement refers to two margin comments he received about sentence variety and complexity. The second clause refers to the following end comment:

When you look back at the body paragraphs, I think you'll notice that you jump around a bit among negatives and positives. In a revision, you might want to take another look at your organization to make sure each paragraph functions in the way that you think it does.

Although the instructor did not explicitly refer to sub-claims in her feedback for that paper, the student understood that some of the sentences in his body paragraphs did not directly support his sub-claim, a concern relating to the third course outcome. The term *sub-claim* was introduced in class, so the student showed his aptitude for discussing his writing by using the appropriate vocabulary. In another student's response, Eric repeated the term the instructor used, and then added something of his own. The instructor wrote:

Something that might help you organize your essay is to think about the sub-claims you want to make—what needs to be said to support your main claim about the value of unbiased information to foster students' critical thinking skills.

Eric responded, “I plan to keep note of my subclaims and revise my commentary statements so that the meaning behind the paragraph will better suit my overall short paper.” His use of the term *commentary statements* is his own term for the description and analysis of his evidence. In a sense, the term comes from Eric’s interlanguage, perhaps derived from his previous writing instruction, as he strives to become fluent in the metalanguage of the composition classroom.

In order to receive the pedagogical benefits of working with a more experienced member of the academic community and entering into dialogue with the teacher, students had to produce drafts and submit them on time. For this assignment, one student did not participate in the revision process, failing to turn in a draft appropriately to receive comments, so that student could not give comments for the prompt. Additionally, Ashley and Megan turned in drafts but received a review with a preliminary evaluation of “adequate,” the lowest passing category, and neglected to give comments on the instructor’s comments. In a conference with her instructor, Ashley had expressed fear in going to the writing center because she was worried she might look dumb, so her silence regarding the instructor’s comments might have resulted from a mismatch between her image of herself as a good student and her paper’s reception as barely satisfactory writing. Without interviewing the student, we can only surmise that she was uncomfortable with how others perceived her writing. At that moment in the quarter, she chose not to enter the conversation at all.

## Discussion

In this study, we have explored students’ responses to teacher feedback through the framework of CDA and have provided structural, interactional, and interdiscursive analyses.

The structural analysis indicates the prominence of what Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) call “emerging composing skills,” a form of developmental academic literacy (p. 142). Since students were new to the university and its academic conventions, they were testing out new ways of writing and talking about their writing. What emerges is the appropriation of the technical terms of claim-based argument writing that their teacher uses. Most of the students wrote their responses in an academic tone

and used a wide range of linguistic strategies when they commented on the usefulness of teacher comments. In our data, students tried to show their appreciation for and valuing of the comments through various phrases and generally avoided directly blaming the teacher for unclear comments that she may have made. Our results echo the findings of an earlier study by Smith (1997), who found a relationship between the use of subject and positive/negative evaluations in teacher comments. In her study, teachers used “you” (meaning the student) in end comments predominantly when they gave positive comments to praise students’ achievement. In our study, students also used different linguistic strategies to write positive and negative comments; they explicitly described the usefulness of teacher comments and used a variety of phrases, while most of them hedged and implicitly wrote about the comments they did not understand. Adopting such teacher-like strategies may be an indicator of students’ active engagement in their learning, and their expression of agency in the activities of the writing classroom.

In our interactional analysis, we found that most students took on an active role as a good student and a hardworking writer. Since we initially had doubts about students’ freedom to express their criticism of the teacher’s comments, our findings at once confirm and deny our suspicions. Students did write what was asked of them in the prompt, but they also found their own ways of getting around its limitations in order to express themselves effectively with regard to their writing. According to Foucault (1995), control and surveillance are “integrated into the teaching relationship” (p. 175) as a way to increase the efficiency of the educational system, whether the students like it or not. That is, control and surveillance form an integral part of the educational system; the system controls and regulates student behaviors to promote learning. Examples of this include regulation through the required composition credit for graduation, the series of assignments, and a grade for every course. Previous studies that mentioned power in feedback practices, in particular, have pointed out that there are power asymmetries between the student and teacher. Teacher comments were often perceived as directives because students could not ignore the reality of receiving a grade from their teachers (Richardson, 2000). Some

students have even recognized the necessity of asymmetries in power in the teacher's feedback in furthering the student's own knowledge and skill acquisition (Sutton & Gill, 2010).

When students in our study were directly commanded to write a paper, read the comments from the teacher, and respond to her comments, some students found ways to tailor the assignment to their own needs, given the power asymmetries in the feedback. Just as Sutton and Gill's (2010) students reconceptualized the social and discursive practices inherent in the feedback process to meet their needs, our students similarly exerted their agency by taking the opportunity to resist the authority of the teacher, while others rejected it altogether. Written responses to the teacher's comments functioned as a site where students expressed their agency, often in the form of resistance, because the teacher (or prompt) left room for criticism. As Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue, "agency is not an individual phenomenon, and decisions about what to act on and how to act on it are always co-constructed in interaction with other agents, particularly the teacher's feedback itself" (p. 220). Although it was common for students to accept the teacher's comments, a student like Ryan did not think of the teacher's comments as an absolute command and found a way to resist the teacher's authority by positioning himself as a collaborator. Alex understood what the teacher comments meant, but questioned the validity of the comments and resisted revising because he did not see the value of revising his work. Students in this study showed that they acted not as passive recipients of power but as agents who exerted their own power by making the final decisions in the revision of their writing. Our interactional analysis, thus, provides evidence of students' rejection of the potential directiveness of teacher comments.

Our interdiscursive analysis illustrates that students used not only language from the teacher's comments but also metalanguage from the composition classroom. As shown in Eric's example, both the style of writing and the lexical choices that students made reflect their emergent academic literacies. By using the technical terms from class and the course outcomes, students drew from different sources in an intertextual display of their competence in the metacognitive aspects of writing. Not unlike the "hidden dialogicality" that describes a child's incorporation of

guidance offered by an adult to the child during the child's socialization, the students' participation in a dialogue with their teacher through the comments represents their socialization into the conventions of the academic community (Wertsch, 1991, p. 92). One student saw a discrepancy between her desired role and her position in the class, and she chose not to participate in the discussion. A few students resisted participating by not turning in their paper drafts or not responding to the instructor comments. The nonparticipatory students then missed out on the opportunity to practice developing their metalanguage in the composition classroom.

Our findings indicate that if students are empowered to become active agents in the feedback process through reflection and dialogue, they not only practice using composition metalanguage but also move closer to socialization into the academic community. Student empowerment may or may not have a direct impact on the quality of student writing, as exhibiting power does not necessarily improve one's writing. Yet taking an active role in the feedback process puts students in control of their writing choices and their learning, as such a role approximates the activities of the academic community. The agency students gain from a teacher-student feedback exchange, as described in our study, is vital to their success as critical thinkers, writers, and developing scholars.

### Implications

This study provides both theoretical and pedagogical implications on how writing teachers can improve their teaching and feedback practices. In the New Literacy Studies, writing is seen as a social and cultural activity, rather than a cognitive act (Gee, 2015). In this sense, learning to write is to become socialized into a community—learning the ways and behaving like accepted members of that community. When newcomers are enculturated into the community, they are likely to encounter unequal power relations, conflicts, and negotiations between different perspectives. Providing more opportunities to practice writing opens a window into their expression of power and identity and eventually helps students to become part of an academic community. Teachers can thus create various writing opportunities for students so that they can practice participating in academic conversations and become more familiar with academic

conventions. In this study, students used their “written response to teacher feedback” as a way to demonstrate what they learned in the composition class, for instance, through use of academic tone and organization. Giving feedback on the teacher’s comments is a meaningful academic activity in which students can apply what they have learned in class as developing scholars.

As part of the process of enculturating students into academic communities, teachers need to be more aware of the power dynamic that exists in a writing class, particularly in the feedback process. In our study, most of the students showed their identity as “good students” by simply agreeing with the teacher’s comments rather than trying to push back against the teacher’s ideas by clarifying their writing or asking further questions. This sort of compliance illustrates how students sometimes consider feedback to be a one-way conversation in which a teacher tells them how to write, rather than their receiving possible suggestions from their teacher that they then incorporate on their own terms. To invite students to craft their writing voices and allow them to make their own discourse choices, teachers can promote “two-way communication” through mitigated comments using lexical hedges such as “maybe” and “perhaps” (Treglia, 2008, p. 128). In this way, students are presented with advice they can consider, and options they can explore as they wield their authority as writers.

The findings of this study also reveal that students sometimes perceive teacher feedback to be controlling or regulating their voice as an author. In some cases, they resisted teacher feedback or rejected the authority of the teacher altogether. To alleviate the constraints of unequal teacher-student power relationships, teachers can emphasize students’ agency in the feedback process, and students will be able to engage in the revision process more actively. With this goal in mind, teachers can then invite students to respond to the teacher’s comments. Such a response could take the form of “written response to teacher feedback” used in this study, or teachers can have students offer their own evaluation of their writing, or ask which comments stood out to the student and why. Another possible approach would be to solicit students’ reactions to the comments in a note or memo form. Shvidko (2015) explored how students engage in the

feedback process by examining L2 students' response to teacher comments in what she calls a Letter to the Reviewer. A Letter to the Reviewer is a memo that students write to reviewers (i.e., their teacher or classmates) after reflecting on the comments they have received; students identify their own strengths and weaknesses in each draft, and ask for further feedback or clarification. She argues that this technique has a number of benefits including fostering collaborative revision between teacher and students and helping students become reflective readers (Shvidko, 2015). Teaching and feedback practices such as these encourage students to establish their authorship, and are sensitive to students' and teachers' shared role in the circulation of power in the writing process.

Furthermore, creating a dialogue between students and instructors through responses to teacher feedback will enable students' engagement in the writing process. Such a dialogue creates a space where teachers can treat students as what Sommers (2006) refers to as "evolving writer[s]" in a partnership seeking to advance their writing skills (p. 254). By asking students to share their response to teacher feedback, students can address the effectiveness of teacher comments for revising purposes as a preliminary step in the uptake of those comments. This dialogue might also take the shape of having students reflect on the feedback they have received, or on what they learned from reading peers' papers, or in conference memos, writer's memos, or letters to the reviewer describing their ongoing concerns. Students' metacognitive practices, in combination with a dialogue with their instructor, can validate their developing authorship. The ultimate goal is to promote dialogue through the feedback exchange so that students develop their own habit—unsolicited—of responding to instructor feedback. Student-initiated interest in the feedback process is reflective of students' agency in their learning process; as stronger critical thinkers, students will have more tools at their disposal to improve their writing.

In addition, this study suggests the value of using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework in the field of composition and feedback studies. In our study, CDA allowed us to investigate students' responses to teacher comments in the context of the social practices surrounding them. Specifically, CDA made it possible to explore the multiplicity and interdiscursivity of the text and observe power and



identity negotiation between student writers and their teacher, including accounting for students' resistance. CDA also enabled us to situate a classroom text within the broader context of the institution. This study suggests that research using the CDA framework can be particularly fruitful in interrogating identity and power dynamics in a composition class. However, the limited scope of the data from one discrete moment could not account for all the complexities of students' negotiation of power and identity over time. Future research using critical discourse analysis could address the trajectory of such negotiations spanning the course of a quarter, through a series of feedback exchanges on assignments. This framework could be valuable to extend the examination of identity and power to spoken and written discourse in a variety of writing contexts.

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