Whose Job Is It? Exploring Subject Tutor Roles in Addressing Students' Academic Writing Via Essay Feedback

Krista Court and Helen Johnson
University of Cumbria

Strong arguments have been forwarded for embedding academic writing development into the UK higher education curriculum and for subject tutors to facilitate this development (Hyland, 2000; Lea & Street, 2006; Monroe, 2003; Wingate, 2006). This small-scale case study explores subject tutors' practices and beliefs with regard to the provision of feedback on aspects of student teachers' academic writing. Data are derived from a content analysis of student essays and associated tutor feedback, along with semi-structured interviews with faculty of education tutors in a new university. Findings, presented within Bourdieu's framework (cited in Shay, 2005) for understanding shared and varied practice, indicate that although there is consensus on the importance of academic literacy, variations in tutors' knowledge and positions lead to variations in practice with regard to how much feedback is given, on what, and how. Questions are raised about quality and standards and implications for best practices are discussed.

There continues to exist within UK higher education (HE) an interest in, and concern for, students' academic writing. It began with a general uneasy feeling that standards were in decline (Davies, Swinburne & Williams, 2006; Lillis & Scott, 2007), which was increasingly attributed to widening participation agendas and the subsequent diversification of entrants into HE. This sense of unease soon gave way to a sense of responsibility as universities started to recognize the necessity to teach academic writing. Subsequently, literature on academic literacy and academic writing, in particular, has flourished (see Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006), exemplifying a range of theories, models, and methods.

Traditionally, the model within the UK has been an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) one aimed at non-native speakers of English only. Provision has taken the form of mostly generic, sometimes subject-specific, academic skills development classes prior to and/or during students' degree programs. The discourse that has tended to accompany and justify this model has been one of "deficit" (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2002), i.e., international students lack language proficiency and knowledge of UK academic conventions. However, this model is becoming increasingly difficult to justify. This is not only due to the changing profile of the student population, (e.g., an increase in non-native speaker home students), but also the growing appreciation of the different, yet equally valuable, types of capital which international students possess (e.g., social and cultural). Hence, this model of support has been challenged, and so too has the discourse surrounding it.

Supplanting it is a discourse of inclusivity, supported by an *academic literacies* view that any student transitioning from a secondary to tertiary education, whether a native or non-native speaker, needs to draw on both a range of literacies and an understanding of the meaning-making and identities associated with each in order to be successful in HE (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate, 2006). This perspective builds on foregoing academic literacy perspectives and models: (a) the *study skills* model (similar to the EAP model), which characterizes academic writing skills as generic and transferable and treats them as an add-on to the core curriculum that is typically delivered by centralized service staff (Wingate, 2006), and (b) the *academic socialization* model, which seeks to induct students into the academic community of practice through a process of engagement with the discourses that exist already and remain largely uncontested within the community (Lea & Street, 2006).

Where the academic literacies perspective goes further than the two previous ones, though, is in its challenge of the status quo. Students are not viewed as empty vessels that need filling; nor are they viewed as apprentices who need to learn the rules of the game. Instead, students are viewed as active participants in the negotiation and creation of meaning. As such, they are involved in the complex power relationships that exist within, but also structure, dominant discourses (Lillis, 2002; Lea & Street, 2006). The academic literacies perspective, therefore, seeks to give students a voice by advocating a dialogic approach to the development of academic literacies, one which encourages questioning and challenging the conventions that both characterize and bind the world of academia.

It also recognizes the range of literacies required by students, particularly in increasingly modularized programs of study. Each module and, indeed, assessment type within each module may well require a different genre and mode of meaning-making (Hyland, 2000; Lea & Street, 2006). It is for this reason, and for the reason that epistemology and writing are intricately intertwined (Somerville & Crème, 2005), that those supporting an academic literacies view advocate

embedding academic literacy into the curriculum, to be nurtured by module tutors, i.e., subject specialists who are themselves, it is assumed, fully conversant with the discourse practices within their academic communities of practice and who are best placed to explore the literacy requirements of their subject and of their assignments (Monroe, 2003).

To recap, there is a growing consensus in the UK that a good standard of academic writing is more than just desirable: it is crucial for engaging with and learning one's subject, including for contesting and constructing knowledge, for progression, and ultimately for academic achievement and recognition (Hyland, 2013a). There have also been strong arguments put forward for embedding academic writing into the curriculum (Hyland, 2000; Haggis, 2006; Wingate, 2006) and, although examples of good practice in the UK context are still limited, case studies describing and evaluating embedded writing initiatives are emerging (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Wingate, Andon & Congo, 2011; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009; Wingate & Winch, 2010; see also the "Thinking Writing" Project at Queen Mary, University of London, and initiatives developed in the "Write Now" Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning at London Metropolitan University).

This momentum towards an embedded academic literacies approach aligns perfectly well with the shift in thinking around assessment from "*of*" learning to "*for*" and "*as*" learning. The last two prepositions are associated with such practices as the provision of on-going formative and dialogic feedback, feed *forward,* in-class engagement with marking criteria and exemplars, and peer- and self-evaluation, all of which reflect a desire to empower learners, not only through an increased understanding of the complexity of marking itself, but also through the development of the capacity to make informed and 'insider' judgments about the quality of one's work (Boud, 2000; Dearing, 1997; Dochy, Segers & Sluismans, 1999; Sadler, 1998; Taras, 2002).

The Purpose of This Study

It is the intersection in the literature between academic literacies and assessment *for* learning in which this piece of research is situated. The importance of feedback to student writers is, according to Hyatt (2005, citing Ivanic, 1998; Benesch, 2000; Hyland & Tse, 2004), "well documented" within academic literacy literature (p. 339). A relatively recent case study conducted by Wingate and colleagues (2011) shows assessment feedback to be a "highly effective method" of writing instruction (p. 77). Our own research (Court, 2014) corroborates this. Yet we also know that subject tutors may be reluctant to address issues of academic writing (Mitchell & Evison, 2006) and may have difficulty translating "tacit" knowledge into explicit guidelines (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Jacobs, 2005; Lea & Street, 2000; Murray, 2006). A further review of the

literature reveals that practices and underlying beliefs regarding feedback can vary among tutors both within and across subject disciplines (Read, Francis & Robson, 2005; Smeby, 1996) and are conditioned by a number of factors: institutional requirements, time constraints, and work pressures (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Nicol, 2010; Tuck, 2012); linguistic background and professional experience (Santos, 1988; Weigle, 1999); ideas of what constitutes good writing, albeit tacit ones in some cases (Elbow, 2006; Hyland, 2013b; Lea & Street, 2000; Nesi & Gardner, 2006); and personal preference (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Hyland, 2013b). With regard to this particular article, Hyland's research (2013c) is the most salient, despite being conducted with English as a second language writers and their subject tutors. His findings indicate that tutors are more concerned with meaning-making than they are with grammatical accuracy. However, the feedback tutors provide does not necessarily support students in expressing themselves according to discipline-specific conventions and discourse practices.

Given that subject tutors may not want to develop students' academic writing, and given that they seem to vary in their beliefs about what good writing is and how their knowledge and beliefs should be enacted through feedback, calls for embedded, tutor-led writing instruction need to be answered with situated research. In other words, faculties need to determine whether subject tutors are, indeed, the ones best equipped to take on this role. This article fulfills this requirement by reporting the findings of a small-scale case study involving mixed research methods, of five subject tutors within a new university's Faculty of Education and their provision of feedback on student teachers' writing. The specific research questions are:

- How much feedback do tutors offer on aspects of academic writing?
- What aspects of academic writing do tutors comment on?
- What are the reasons for tutors' feedback practices?

This study starts from the assumption that developing the academic literacy of student teachers who are training as primary teachers either at the undergraduate or postgraduate level (e.g., those earning a BA with Honors in Primary Education with Qualified Teacher's Status or QTS and those earning a Post Graduate Certificate in Education or PGCE), is especially important because language, genre, and discourse awareness are essential for the teaching of writing, an invariable part of any primary teacher's job. Therefore, situating this research within a Faculty of Education in order to learn about current practices and tutors' beliefs towards academic writing development provides useful baseline information on which policy makers can make important decisions about how best to develop students' academic writing in the future.

Methods

Participants

Once ethical clearance for the research project was obtained from the University, a faculty global e-mail was sent making polite requests for tutor participants in a study exploring written feedback practices. Five tutors responded positively, three of whom gave us access to their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) sites, i.e., Blackboard, on which student essays could be accessed via Turnitin (plagiarism detection software), and two of whom gave us paper copies of essays and their feedback. The subject tutor markers all had at least ten years of experience lecturing and marking within primary education in an HE context and between 2-19 years within this specific Faculty of Education. While the tutors' job descriptions include marking students' work and providing feedback, there are no University regulations stipulating the amount of feedback, nor is there a requirement to mark/comment on students' standard of English. There has, however, been a drive to improve the timeliness and quality of feedback in response to relatively low National Student Survey scores in the assessment and feedback category. Tutors are acutely aware of the need to provide "prompt," "detailed" and "clear" comments, as there are three feedback-related questions on all programme evaluation forms completed by students.

Two essays from each tutor (10 in total) were chosen for the purposes of this case study. All essays were related to primary education, and all had the same module code prefix, indicating a general education module as opposed to a specialty; in this case, all essays were related to the learner and/or learning. Where more than two essays were offered per tutor, essays were chosen at random from those with the same module code prefix. All the essays were produced by British students, and all were either first-year essays or the first essay written within the first semester of a PGCE. Year one or first semester students were targeted because we were trying to capture essays which would reflect the maximum input from the tutor, and so we accepted the first piece of work from a student group or the first piece of work set by a tutor new to the students or the first piece of work produced in a subject area never studied before by the student. Our assumption was that if academic writing feedback was being given, then it would most likely be given early on in the students' programs and/or in their academic relationship with their tutors.

We sought permission from the students to look at their essays, along with the feedback they received, and obtained their consent to be interviewed. The interview data with students, although not reported on herein, represents the second stage of this project and will contribute to a follow-up article. Students were assured that we were looking at their tutors' feedback rather than at their work per se but were offered some additional, retrospective feedback on their writing in return for their involvement in the research project.

Numerical Data

Content analysis was used by the authors to count and then categorize all instances of academic writing "errors" in each of the essays. Every occurrence of an error was counted not because we advocate this practice ourselves, but because we needed consistency and a base from which to make comparisons with the tutors' marking. For the purpose of this research, an "error" was defined as a linguistic inaccuracy judged against a standard variety of British English appropriate for the academic essay genre and/or any deviation from the academic and discoursal conventions governing this same genre within the subject area of primary education. Thus, we were initially identifying anything related to syntax, lexis, spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, layout, essay structure, paragraphing, academic discourse (e.g. coherence/cohesion), style, register, and referencing.

The authors looked at one essay together to identify errors, discuss error type, and devise categories for classification purposes. In devising our categories, we drew on the work of Wingate (2006) and Hyatt (2005). Wingate (2006) identifies two levels of learning involved in producing academic texts: the *techniques* level, which represents surface-level features such as spelling, grammar, cohesion, structure, citation, and style, and the *understanding* level, which involves "understanding the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed" (p. 462). Hyatt (2005) carried out a corpus analysis of the feedback given on sixty Master's level essays and identified seven categories based on the function of the feedback, two of which we deemed particularly useful for our purposes—*Stylistic Comments* and *Structural Comments*—both of which mapped neatly onto Wingate's *techniques* level.

A large number of low-level categories primarily associating academic writing with *techniques* formed the basis of our first independent essay coding. During our first standardization session, in which we came together to compare our coding and refine our categories, we acknowledged the difficulty of teasing out issues of academic writing from epistemology, i.e., the deeper levels of *understanding* referred to by Wingate, and as a result, we decided to use the higher-order category "Genre" to capture all those features that mark the academic essay as distinct from other genres. This included not just issues of style and structure, but also issues related to the rhetorical processes in academic discourse and the language devices used to express them (e.g., mitigating claims or hedging).

Referencing was another gray category crossing both the *techniques* level (e.g., accurate citation) and the *understanding* level (e.g., using a citation as support for a claim); being selective in terms of quality of source and currentness. However, in our marking of the students' work we noticed that tutors were giving a relatively high number of comments relating to referencing (at both levels), which indicated to us that referencing should constitute its own category to reflect the special status that tutors seemed to bestow upon it.

A second independent marking of one essay each was followed by another standardization session. Once we had achieved a high level of consistency in our coding, we then applied the following categorization system to the remaining five essays, one from each tutor marker: Genre, Referencing, Lexis, Syntax, Sentence Construction and Punctuation (See Appendix for definitions and examples).

Numerical Data Analysis

Tutors' comments (defined loosely as any mark on the text indicating a problem, from circles / underlines / exclamation marks to full explanations) on each of the five essays were categorized and counted and then compared with the research team's marking in order to establish the percentage and type of errors actually commented on by tutors. It is the detailed analysis of the quantity of tutor comments within and across these categories which forms the numerical element of this research.

Narrative Data

The narrative element consists of the academic subject tutor interviews. A pilot interview with a non-participant tutor in the faculty was conducted to ensure questions were clear and valid, as well as that the five categories established above were sufficiently and clearly exemplified by actual student errors. This last adjustment was especially important to ensure that interviewees could relate to, and talk around, concrete examples rather than abstract notions of students' academic writing. The interview schedule was refined in the light of this pilot interview and of the pilotee's feedback on the structure of the interview and the questions. An external, independent interviewer was employed to carry out the interviews in order to avoid tension between the authors and faculty colleagues who might have felt as if their feedback practices were being evaluated.

The semi-structured interview schedule was divided into two parts. In the first section, tutors were asked whether and why they commented on the five categories described above. They also had the opportunity to say whether they commented on any other writing issues. In the second section, the focus of the questions was on why there was found to be a discrepancy between the number of errors the research team found and the number of errors commented on by tutors in general; whether and why tutors felt there was a need for more writing skills intervention and, if so, when this might happen; and, if intervention was regarded as valuable, to what extent they would feel it was within their job remit and knowledge/skills capacity to provide it.

Narrative Data Analysis

The interviews were 45 to 55 minutes in duration and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. An initial coding framework was constructed based on concepts from Bourdieu's theory of social practice, as cited in Shay (2005). However, this framework was further developed through ongoing dialogue between the two researchers and as early coding identified emergent themes and sub-themes (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The themes were then refined and all of the data were coded through a constant comparative approach to determine an established framework of conceptual themes and a preliminary understanding of the relationships between them. Interview transcripts were also matched with each tutor's essay feedback in order to analyze areas of convergence and divergence between actual and espoused practice.

The findings and our analysis were presented to faculty colleagues at a development day to seek feedback and comments, helping to improve this article.

Findings

Essay data

Quantity and range of errors commented on. Tutors offer academic writing comments on all categories identified by the research team, but only to some extent. Whereas the research team found a total of 299 errors in five essays, the tutors commented on 91 errors, representing 30% of the total errors that could have been commented on. Also interesting is the variation in the quantity of comments given by the tutors, ranging from 8% to 53%. See Table 1 below.

Tutors have a notion of error gravity; that is, some categories are commented on more than others. Categories are ranked in order of gravity in Table 2 below, with Genre being the category most commented on and Syntax being the category least commented on.

Also evident in Table 2 is the individual variation among tutor markers in terms of category reach and

Table 1
Quantity of Errors Commented on by Tutors

% Range of Total Errors Commented on Across Five Tutors				
8	22	23	45	53

Table 2
Error Gravity, Category Reach and Percentage of Possible Errors Commented on by Tutor

Category	% of possible errors commented on by tutor markers (M)				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Genre	70	33	24	67	100
Referencing	100	67	8	33	95
Lexis	72	25	11	0	27
Sentence construction and punctuation	25	0	0	0	19
Syntax	20	0	5	0	0

percentage of possible errors commented on within the categories. In terms of category reach, marker 1's spans across all five categories. However, marker 4's spans only two categories, and markers 2, 3, and 5 reach across slightly different categories.

With regard to percentage of possible errors commented on within the categories, there is wide variation. Whereas marker 5 comments on all possible errors identified in the Genre category, marker 3 comments on 24% of the total possible errors in that same category. Similarly, where marker 1 picks up 72% of all the lexical errors identified by the research team, marker 4 does not pick up any. In fact, errors of lexis, sentence construction, and syntax attract no comments at all from some of the tutors.

Thus, the numerical analysis presented above indicates that while there is some shared practice, there is also individual variation. The interview data are presented next in order to explore this variation.

Interview data

Why do tutors comment on aspects of academic writing? There was a consensus amongst the interviewees that academic literacy was important for operating both within the wider university context and within the teacher-training context of the Faculty of Education. In fact, all of the interviewees stated that they would—and they do—pick up on errors in each of the categories identified above for the reasons stated below:

1. Because ours is a widening participation university and, as such, many students have underdeveloped writing skills:
   - "… we're an access university" (M4)
   - "… we know that some of them … are very very weak" (M4)

   - "I think there's no doubt that quite a few of them need some input, help, development in their writing." (M2)
2. Students need academic literacy for the following reasons:
   - For academic development: "… it's going to stop them in an academic world getting further than a basic level…" (M1).
   - For teaching: "In our case particularly because we do teacher training and they've got to teach basic writing skills, punctuation etc to children" (M2).
   - For professional language use: "I think not least on a vocational course for teachers we would have an expectation that they would use appropriate language even in school and if they're writing to parents and so on later …" (M4).

Why do they comment only to some extent then? It is safe to assume that across most British universities, tutors are being asked to do more with less due to decreases in government funding, caps on student numbers, and, with the increase of tuition fees, students being re-conceptualized as "customers" requiring, if not demanding via the National Student Survey, better "service." These constraints of resources, time, and numbers were a common theme among the tutors:

- "I have 15 minutes to mark each essay" (M3);
- "If you're marking 100 assignments in a batch, you don't always have time to go through them with a fine-tooth comb and a very short turnaround time, you don't" (M2).

Tutors' beliefs. Variation appears to exist in terms of knowledge of discourse conventions and views on:

student competence, affect, academic writing development and their role in its development.

Minor differences in knowledge of discourse conventions. While all the interviewees said that all five categories established by the research team were comment-worthy, two tutors acknowledged a degree of uncertainty with regard to certain aspects of academic writing:

- "I have to admit that's not one of my strongest things. I use semi-colons quite a bit but colons I have to think about it, so again if I have to think about it too long, possibly I'm not going to be picking up on it" (M1);
- "[Re: comma splice] I don't know that that's something that often leaps out at me" (M2).

Views on student competence. Two discourses were identifiable in the interview data, the first suggesting students lack the skills necessary to cope with university writing and the second suggesting that students are only beginning to learn these skills.

- Deficit: "I think there's too many of them who lack basic writing skills …" (M2).
- Developmental: "They're early on in their writing. The sentences are quite long, so they don't know when to stop" (M5).

Views on affect. Whereas the first tutor below feels that too many comments would impact negatively on students, the second feels that, with discussion to mediate potential negative affect, numerous comments can serve developmental purposes.

- "... a comment every 30 words on a comma or a circle or something, would just be, the students would leave honestly, in droves" (M4).
- "…when they've received an assignment back and it's been scrawled all over by me, they're a bit shocked, and I said, but it's there to help you, you need to get over that shock, and it's there to support you. Ok, I can see now. So once I've talked it through then … I think it makes a difference" (M5).

Views on academic writing development. Although the tutors did not name or claim to adhere to a specific model of academic writing, three views were perceptible in the tutors' discourse. They include the following:

1. A Study Skills View: Academic writing and subject knowledge are deemed by the tutor below to be discrete entities, with the former conceptualized as a generic set of skills that anyone can teach:

   - "… I am equipped to teach the students to write an essay for me in terms of my specific content but I think anybody can teach them the skills of writing an assignment…" (M2);
   - "I do equip my students to write for my subject, but I don't teach them about paragraphs and punctuation" (M2).

2. An Academic Socialization View: The tutors below express a notion of inducting students into the academic community, bringing them into the fold and giving them time to let their writing skills work themselves out as they come into contact with existing conventions:

   - "Because I think that when they're coming into the university we've to induct them into our writing processes and that's not always made clear to them through a study skills course" (M1);
   - "Work does improve over time on both levels, content and grammar" (M3).

3. An Academic Literacies View: The tutor below mentions engaging in dialogue with her students and embedding academic writing into the program, two principles lying at the heart of an academic literacies model.

   - "But there's no time within the module to teach them in smaller groups and so I think you would get that level of verbal discussion which would then enhance their writing" (M5)
   - "There needs to be more intervention throughout the degree. It's not just in the first year, yes, throughout each year that they're here" (M5).

How tutors view their role in developing students' writing. Tutors appear to view their role in different ways, as indicated by the responses below:

1. Yes, it is the subject tutor's job: "I do think it's part of my role as a subject tutor" (M5 in response to her picking up on a relatively large number of linguistic errors).
2. No, it is not: "I don't view that as my job particularly to help students address

individual issues such as a lack of ability to use an apostrophe or a paragraph" (M2).

3. It should be shared with the learning support unit: [Intervention should come from] "both sides really, from us as tutors and from the library maybe, from [the learning support unit] yes" (M5).

4. Not sure: "… but whose job would it be to intervene and who would track that and follow it up is my question" (M3).

Tutor's practices. The interviewees also reveal differences in their feedback practices in terms of what to give feedback on, when to give it and how:

1. What to give feedback on: "…it's that academic style that I would pick up" (M1); [Poor in-text referencing] "is one of my bugbears and soapboxes …" (M5).

2. When to give feedback: "I will put more time in for a first year or a first assignment than I might for a later assignment…" (M1); "I didn't look at punctuation or paragraphing or anything like that, but I did look at referencing because it was their very first assignment, but I don't particularly see that as my job with 2nd or 3rd year students" (M2); "… so if it's not picked up, even in Year 1 or Year 4, then I don't feel I'm doing them justice. So even in Year 4 when I mark an assignment, I still look at all these things" (M5).

3. How to give feedback: "I would just grab 'Vague,' pop it on there, release, when they hover over it they get a very comprehensive explanation" (M4 with reference to using Turnitin's standard comments); "I often comment about the use of reading on the cover sheet but I don't often comment about wrong word use, lexis, on the front, unless it was absolutely dreadful all the way through" (M2); "There's a comment bank on the right hand side and you can also make your own and what I've done, is added my own, because you can just click and drag a blank box and put your own comments in, so I've started with that now" (M5 with reference to Turnitin).

Discussion

Bourdieu's theory of social practice (cited in Shay, 2005) provides a useful tool for interpreting the data presented above. Within Bourdieu's framework, practice (i.e., academic writing feedback) is socially situated and has to be seen in the context of its "field." For the purposes of this research, the field and sub-fields are academia, the University, the Faculty of Education, and the subject discipline of primary education. It is the institutional and professional field that determines the epistemic "principles

of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 265 cited in Shay, 2005, p. 667). The participants who share these principles (i.e., primary education subject tutors) form a community of practice. Their shared set of principles is referred to as the *habitus*. In other words, the subject tutors share a common "perceptual framework" (Goodwin, 1994, p. 616 cited in Shay, 2005, p. 668) which guides their marking. However, participants have varying "capital," for example, knowledge or commitment to particular theories within the field, and as a result, they may hold different "positions." To put it simply, and with reference to this particular research, variations in subject tutor capital and positions do appear to lead to variations in practice with regard to how much feedback is given, on what, and how. Figure 1 represents the multiple layers through which tutor feedback on academic writing is filtered. When the interview data are viewed through this lens and particularly when they are matched to the numerical data, some interesting observations come to light.

First, subject tutor markers seem to believe that there is more of a "habitus" than actually exists. All were unanimous in their pronouncement that academic literacy is important, and no real commitment to an error gravity hierarchy was revealed in interviews; all 5 categories for classifying errors were stated as being comment-worthy by the tutor markers, and tutors believed they commented on all of them in their own marking. However, the content analysis of their essay data, as presented in Table 2, revealed this not to be the case. Marker 4, for example, picks up no errors of lexis, syntax, and sentence construction and punctuation. There is a difference, therefore, between his/her espoused and actual practice.

It may be the case that when marking this particular essay the constraints of the field (time, resources, quantity of essays) prevented this tutor from commenting on these types of errors, or it may be the case that this tutor holds unconscious attitudes to standards in writing. For example, the tutor, like those identified in Hyland's (2013c) study, privileges content (meaning) over language, managing somehow to separate the two. If this is the case, then the hope would be that the mark reflects this unequal weighting. However, if the tutor is marking the student down for linguistic inaccuracies but giving the impression, via no comments, that they do not matter, then there is cause for concern. In their study investigating tutors' sense of standards as enacted through marking practices, Bloxham and Boyd (2012) discovered that the standard of English did indeed act as a "trigger" quality for grading (p. 627). If this is normal practice, then we are doing students a disservice not highlighting and helping students address linguistic errors and not raising their awareness of the power of language (accurate and appropriate in terms of genre and linguistic variety) in the marker's perceptual framework and also, arguably, in the minds of the parents with whom they will one day correspond.

Figure 1
The Mulitple Layers Through Which Feedback Is Filtered
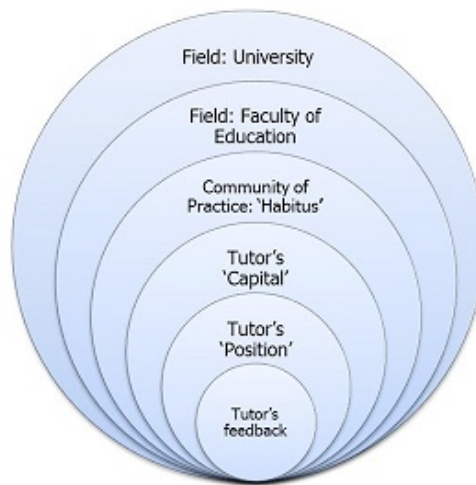
Second, viewing marking as a complex, multi-layered social practice helps to explain at least some of the individual variation that exists across the tutors in terms of their marking/feedback practices. The tutor who exhibits a good level of language awareness and familiarity with academic discourse practices and who seems to align herself with assessment *for* learning and an academic literacies view (M5) comments on a high number of errors comparatively. She appears to possess the capital required to forward students' academic writing. This capital would then seem to impact on her position in that she sees it as her job as subject tutor to comment on the categories identified, and her position would seem to determine her practice in that she comments on academic writing issues regardless of year of study. In contrast, the tutor who acknowledges a level of unfamiliarity with certain discourse practices, and whose own discourse seems to reflect a deficit/study skills perspective (M2), provides fewer comments across fewer categories. She does not view it as her job to address issues of sentence construction, punctuation, and syntax and would not comment on these issues beyond Year 1 of a student's academic journey.

The question arises, is this level of variation acceptable? If we accept that marking is a "socially situated interpretive act" (Shay, 2005, p. 663) and that consensus will never be achieved due to both shifting interpretations and standards (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012), then the answer must be "yes." However, this does not mean that the existence of variation ought not to be acknowledged within the community of practice, and a good starting point for this is a discussion about what is valued (Broad, 2003). The findings presented within this article suggest that tutors do value academic literacy for student teachers' academic development, their teaching, and their professional language use. Therefore, we would argue that subject tutors need to engage each other in dialogue about what aspects of academic writing they privilege, why they privilege these, and how this impacts on their essay feedback practices and also, possibly, on the marks they give students.

We would also agree with Broad (2003) that colleagues need to discuss how to represent what they have agreed to value. Adding an "academic language" component to marking criteria may help bring the issue to the fore for both staff and students, but it may also create an artificial and unnecessary separation between language and epistemology, between *techniques* and *understanding*. This is something the authors have grappled with themselves in the process of carrying out this research. It is for this reason, and for the reason that some subject tutors may not have total confidence in their own linguistic awareness, that we would suggest subject tutors come together with EAP staff or language specialists to share knowledge and to address complex issues of language and epistemology and how best to develop students' academic literacy within modules, including within assessments and feedback. Ideally discussions would lead to staff development and then on to faculty-based initiatives aimed at developing the academic literacy of all student teachers.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the extent and nature of the role taken by subject tutors in developing students' academic writing through the feedback they provide on students' essays. We do not assume that feedback on essays

is the only way that academic writing is developed in this particular faculty, but we do know it can play a very important role in teaching and learning. We also acknowledge the limitations of this study, including its small-scale nature and the focus on negative (errors) as opposed to positive developmental feedback, and we believe the latter to be a worthwhile focus for future research. The results of this piece of research, however, do shed light on these tutors' current practices and underlying beliefs and values. The essay data indicate that tutors comment on all 5 categories of error established by the research team, but only to some extent. There is individual variation in terms of the quantity of comments given, the number of categories that are commented on, and the percentage of possible errors commented on within each category.

The interview data reveal a shared belief in the value of academic literacy but divergent views on the actual practice of giving feedback, which we judged to be due to differences in tutors' knowledge and positions. When marking is viewed as a social and interpretive act, this variation is not wholly surprising. Nevertheless, divergent practices may result in divergent experiences for these student teachers, possibly on a number of levels, both on and beyond their program of study. These include: the grades they receive for their assignments; the extent to which their understanding of language, discourse, and genre is developed; their sense of belonging to a discourse community; their future ability to teach writing; and the way they are perceived by prospective parents.

If tutors are committed to the development of all student teachers' academic literacy, then we believe it is necessary that they engage each other in discussion about their feedback practices and about ways of raising their own and their students' awareness of language, discourse, and genre. One suggestion for doing this is to work collaboratively with EAP colleagues or language specialists, taking a team approach to the provision of essay feedback. Another suggestion, if the time and incentive exists on both sides, is to engage in team-teaching, perhaps supporting just one assessment item within one module to begin with and eventually working towards a more holistic approach to embedded literacy instruction.

References

Bailey, R., & Garner, M. (2010). Is the feedback in higher education assessment worth the paper it is written on? Teachers' reflections on their practices. *Teaching in Higher Education, 15,* 187–198.

Benesch, S. (2000). *Critical English for academic purpose: Theory, politics and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2012). Accountability in grading student work: Securing academic standards in a twenty-first century quality assurance context. *British Educational Research Journal, 38*, 615–634.

Broad, B. (2003). *What we really value: Beyond rubrics in teaching and assessing writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *22*, 151–67.

Court, K. (2014). Tutor feedback on draft essays: Developing students' academic writing and subject knowledge. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *38*(3), 327–345.

Davies, S., Swinburne, D., & Williams, G. (Eds.). (2006). *Writing matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on student writing in higher education*. Retrieved from http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/documents/RLFwritingmatters_000.pdf

Dearing, R. (1997). *Higher education in the learning society*. London, UK: HMSO.

Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Sluismans, D. (1999). The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review. *Studies in Higher Education*, *24*, 331–50.

Elbow, B. (2006). Do we need a single standard of value for institutional assessment? An essay response to Asao Inoue's "community-based assessment pedagogy." *Assessing Writing, 11*(2), 81–99.

Ganobcsik-Williams, L. (Ed). (2006). *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education*. New York, NY/Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haggis, T. (2006). Pedagogies for diversity: Retaining critical challenge amidst fears of 'dumbing down.' *Studies in Higher Education 31*(5), 521–35.

Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Skelton, A. (2002). The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning, *Studies in Higher Education*, *27*, 53–64.

Hunter, K., & Tse, H. (2013). Making disciplinary writing and thinking practices an integral part of academic content teaching. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *14*(3), 227–239.

Hyatt, D. F. (2005). 'Yes, a very good point!': A critical genre analysis of a corpus of feedback comments on Master of Education assignments. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *10*, 339–353.

Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. London, UK: Longman.

Hyland, K., &, Tse, P. (2004). Metadiscourse in academic writing: a reappraisal. *Applied Linguistics, 25*(2), 156–177.

Hyland, K. (2013a). Writing in the university: Education, knowledge, and reputation. *Language Teaching*, *46*(1), 53–70.

Hyland, K. (2013b). Faculty feedback: Perceptions and practices in L2 disciplinary writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 22*, 240–253.

Hyland, K. (2013c). Student perceptions of hidden messages in teacher written feedback. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 39,* 180–187.

Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Jacobs, C. (2005). On being an insider on the outside: New spaces for integrating academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *10*, 475–87.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education, 23*, 157–172.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (2000). Student writing and staff feedback in higher education: An academic literacies approach. In M.R. Lea and B. Stierer (Eds.), *Student writing in higher education: New contexts* (pp. 31–46). Buckingham, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B.V. (2006). The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and applications. *Theory into Practice*, *45*(4), 368–377.

Lillis, T. (2002). *Student writing: Access, regulation, desire*. London, UK: Routledge.

Lillis, T., & Scott, M. (2007). Defining Academic Literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics, 4*(1), 5–32.

Mitchell, S., & Evison, A. (2006). Exploiting the potential of writing for educational change at Queen Mary, University of London. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.) *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education: Theories, practice and models* (pp. 68–84). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Monroe, J. (2003). Writing and the disciplines. *Peer Review*, *6*(1), 4–7.

Murray, R. (2006). If not rhetoric and composition, then what? Teaching teachers to teach writing. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.) *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education: Theories, practice and models* (pp. 124–33). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nesi, H., & Gardner, S. (2006). Variation in disciplinary culture: University tutors' views on assessed writing tasks. In R. Kiely, P. Rea-Dickens, H. Woodfield & G. Clibbon (Eds.), *Language culture and identity in applied linguistics* (pp. 99–118). London, UK: BAAL/Equinox.

Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 35*(5), 501–17.

Read, B., Francis, B., & Robson, J. (2005). Gender, 'bias', assessment and feedback: Analyzing the written assessment of undergraduate history essays. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *30*(3), 241–260.

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London, UK: Sage.

Sadler, D. R. (1998). Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, *5*(1), 77–85.

Santos, T. (1988). Professors' reactions to the academic writing of non-native-speaking students. *TESOL Quarterly, 22*(1), 69–90.

Shay, S. (2005). The assessment of complex tasks: A double reading. *Studies in Higher Education*, *30*, 663–679.

Somerville, E., & Crème, P. (2005). Asking Pompeii questions: A co-operative approach to writing in the disciplines. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *10*, 17–28.

Smeby, J. (1996). Disciplinary differences in university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, *1*, 69-79.

Taras, M. (2002). Using assessment for learning and learning from assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *27*, 501–10.

Tuck, J. (2012). Feedback-giving as social practice: Teachers' perspectives on feedback as institutional requirement, work and dialogue. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *17,* 209–221.

Weigle, S.C. (1999). Investigating rater/prompt interactions in writing assessment: Quantitative and qualitative approaches. *Assessing Writing*, *6*(2), 145–178.

Wingate, U. (2006). Doing away with "study skills." *Teaching in Higher Education*, *11*, 457–469.

Wingate, U., & Dreiss, C. (2009). Developing students' academic literacy: An online approach. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning, 3*(1), 14–25. Retrieved from http://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/65/58

Wingate, U., & Winch, C. (2010). *A model for enhancing the academic writing and reasoning of King's undergraduate students*. College Teaching Fund (CTF) Final Project Report.

Wingate, U., Andon, N. & Cogo, A. (2011). Embedding academic writing instruction into subject teaching: A case study. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 12*(1), 69–81.

KRISTA COURT is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Cumbria, where she is also the Subject Lead and Programme Leader for the MA TESOL. She is currently involved in projects aimed at facilitating the transition of overseas students into the University and developing students' academic literacy through feedback.

HELEN JOHNSON has spent her career in English language teaching and language teacher education in both the UK and overseas and is co-editor of the Blackwell's 'Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics'. Having recently retired from her post as Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Cumbria, she is now a freelance teacher and teacher trainer. Her particular interests are language teaching methodology and the development of academic literacy.

Appendix
Description of Error Categories

Genre = anything that marks the academic essay genre apart from other genres (except referencing, which has its own category). This included issues related to cohesion, coherence (cohesive devices); paragraphing (topic sentence, development/support); structure (introduction, body, paragraphs, conclusion); academic style (objective language: pronoun use, active/passive voice, mitigation/qualification; gender-neutral language); argumentation (making claims and warrants, using evidence, positioning/aligning oneself with other voices in the text); and register (formal/informal language, contracted forms).

Referencing = the Harvard System of referencing for acknowledging the work of another author. This included issues related to inclusion of in-text citations and end-of-text references; accuracy of citations and references; appropriateness of quotations/citations (those that actually support or contribute to a line of reasoning; quality in terms of selectiveness and currentness).

Lexis = vocabulary. This included issues related to choice of words/phrases to express meaning; collocations; spelling.

Syntax = grammar. This included issues related to word forms; subject-verb agreement; relative pronouns; gerunds/infinitives; articles; prepositions.

Sentence Structure and Punctuation = simple, compound and complex sentences, accurately assembled and punctuated. This included fragments (i.e., incomplete sentences); run-on sentences; comma splices (i.e., joining two independent clauses with a comma); wrong punctuation; missing punctuation; quotations not integrated grammatically into the fabric of a sentence.