Whose job is it?

Exploring the extent and nature of the role taken by subject tutors in developing trainee teachers' academic writing

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Why this study?

"I keep getting 'This is not a sentence'. I thought it was a sentence if it had a capital letter and a full stop."

Purposes of our research

Situated within the faculty of education

- To explore the extent and nature of the role taken by subject tutors in developing students' academic writing

- Looking at tutors' beliefs and practices

Research Questions

1. How much feedback do tutors give on aspects of academic writing?

1. What aspects of academic writing do tutors comment on?

1. What are the reasons for tutors' FB practices?

Methods

Mixed methods

Numerical

- Content analysis of student essays (Yr 1 or PGCE semester 1) and tutors' written feedback (10 essays / primary education)

Narrative

- Recorded and transcribed interviews with tutors (5)

Essays and Feedback Data Step 1

- Errors noted, categorized and counted by research team
- Drawing on Wingate's (2006) levels of learning (*Techniques / Understanding)* and adapting Hyatt's (2005) categories (*Stylistic / Structural Comments)*

Genre

Referencing

Lexis

Sentence construction and punctuation

Syntax

- All instances of errors counted by research team in 5 essays

Essays and Feedback Data Step 2

1. Tutors' comments categorized and counted;

2. Research team's marking compared with tutors' marking in order to establish the % and type of errors actually commented on by tutors.

- 1 essay per tutor interviewed (5) chosen for detailed comparisons to follow.

Findings

- Tutors offer comments on all categories identified by research team but …

- to some extent: 30% of total errors receive comment (91/299)

- there is individual variation in the quantity of comments given

% range of total errors commented on across 5 tutors				
8	22	23	45	53

- Tutors have a notion of error gravity (some categories commented on more than others)
- There is individual variation in terms of category reach and **% of possible errors** commented on within the categories.

Category	% of possible errors commented on by tutors				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
G	70	33	24	67	100
R	100	67	8	33	95
L	72	25	11	0	27
SCP	25	0	0	0	19
SY	20	0	5	0	0

What are the reasons for tutors' feedback practices?

Indications emerging that, while there is some shared practice, there is also individual variation.

To explore reasons why: interviews.

Interview Data

Semi-structured interviews with 5 tutors recorded, transcribed and coded thematically.

Coding process led to calling on the work of Bourdieu, as reported in Shay (2005). This gives a framework for understanding shared and varied practice within an organization.
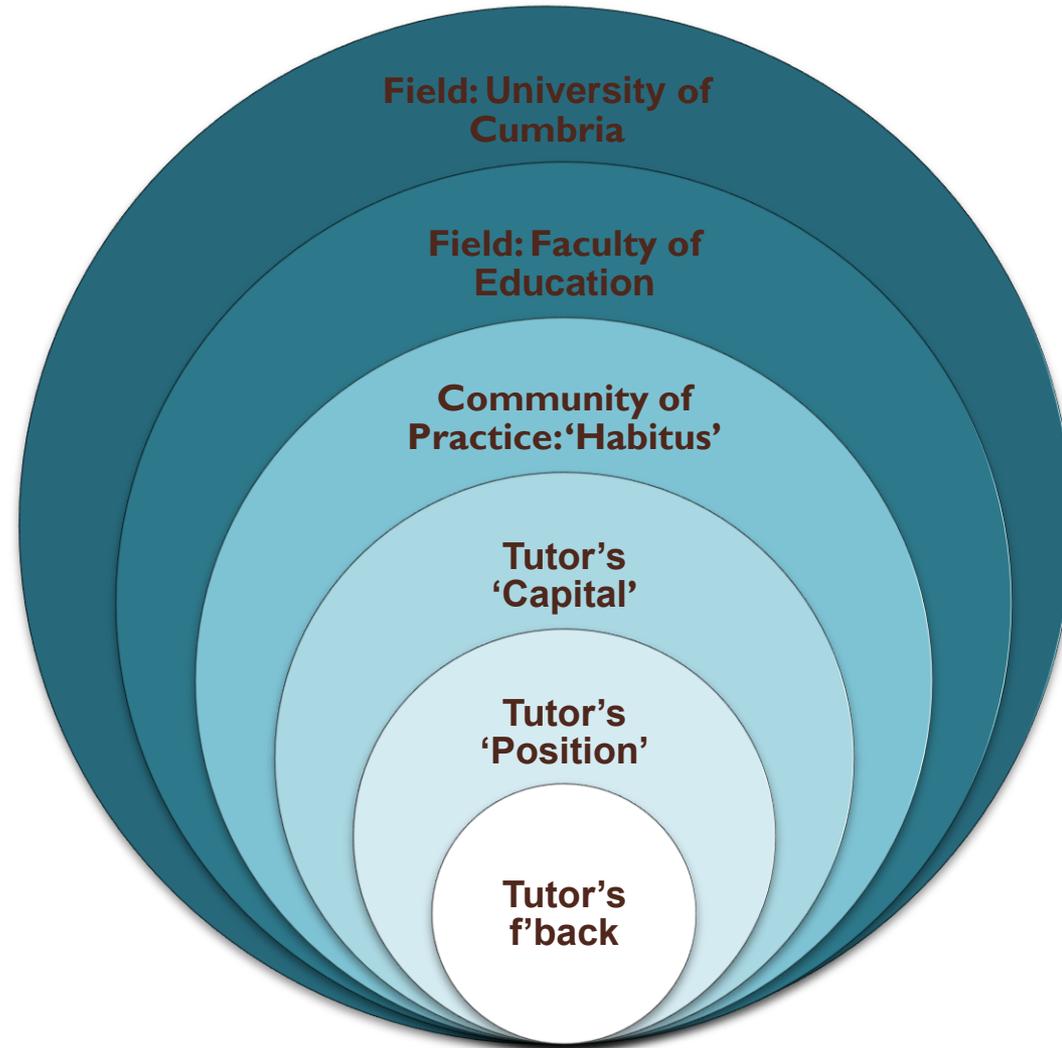
A framework for understanding shared and varied practice

- Practice is 'socially situated' : has to be seen in the context of its 'field' – i.e. Academia + UoC + Education ➔ shared 'principles of vision and division'

- Participants who share these form a 'community of practice'

- This shared set of principles = 'habitus'

However:

- Participants have varying capital, e.g. knowledge or commitment to particular theories within the field

- As a result they may hold different positions

- Their practices may therefore vary

Applied to our context:

Field: University of Cumbria

Field: Faculty of Education

Community of Practice: 'Habitus'

Tutor's 'Capital'

Tutor's 'Position'

Tutor's f'back

Why do tutors offer feedback on AW?

Because it is necessary in our 'field'

Nature of the University

- *… we're an access university … (M4)*

Students' level

- *I think there's no doubt that quite a few of [the students] need some input, help, development in their writing (M2)*

And because students need it within the FoE academic community of practice:

Academic writing matters

- *I imagine that given the same material and the same research structured differently by two students could amount to perhaps 10 marks, that would be my guess (M4)*

Also for further academic development

- *..and secondly it's going to stop them in an academic world getting further than a basic level… (M1)*

And it has rules

- *It's a basic essay writing skill to have an introduction, a main part and a conclusion (M2)*

- *[Poor in-text referencing] is one of my bugbears and soapboxes … (M5)*

- *Although there is a tendency for the pronoun 'I' to be more common in academic writing than it was maybe 10 years ago now. It's crept in more and there's some debate about that, particularly on vocational courses (M4)* (but rules can change)

And it's necessary within the FoE professional community of practice:

For teaching

- *…because our students are going to go and teach children, I feel they ought to be able to write in paragraphs themselves, if that's what they're going to teach children to do (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 only to some extent then?

The 'field' imposes limitations on what can be done:

Constraints of resources, time and numbers:

- *At the moment, the module that we're teaching has writing skills within it but there are 30 students in the groups and that's far too many (M5)*

- *I would say about 20 minutes' marking for each student (M4)*

Why is there individual variation in quantity and category reach (1)?

Because of differences in tutors' capital

5 areas of variability identified:

- Minor differences in knowledge
- Characterizations of student competence
- Views on academic writing development
- Views on assessment
- Own experience as a student

Why is there individual variation in quantity and category reach (2)?

Because variations in capital ➜ variations in tutors' positions on:

- How they see their role in developing AW
- What to give feedback on
- When to give feedback
- How to give feedback

How tutors see their role

Yes

- *I do think it's part of my role as a subject tutor (M5)*

Shared with student

- *… it's about student autonomy and they've got to choose to take on board these comments. I can mark till I'm blue in the face and if they don't want to take that on then I have to accept that they're going to fail that piece of writing (M1)*

What to give feedback on

- *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)*

When to give feedback

Depends on phase of study:

- *I will put more time in for a first year or a first assignment than I might for a later assignment… I'm not going to be picking up on the minutiae that I'm prepared to do at the beginning, because they've had a whole year, three years or four years of that sort of input (M1)*

Throughout study:

- *… 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)*

How to give feedback

Turnitin standard comments useful

- *I would just grab 'Vague' pop it on there, release, when they hover over it they get a very comprehensive explanation (M4)*

Better to make own comments

- *There's a comment bank on the right hand side and you can also make your own and what I've done, because I just started marking last week, 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)*

Location of different kinds of comments

- *I write comments on the front of an assignment and I write quite a few inside it … so, for example, 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)*

Variations in capital and positions lead to variations in practice with regard to how much feedback is given on what and how

Tutors' views suggest 3 different approaches to academic writing development:

Study skills view

- *… 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…*

Academic socialization view

- *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.*

Academic literacies view

- *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.*

Discussion questions

- If most teaching/learning of AW happens exclusively through essay feedback, is this variation in practice acceptable? What about the missed learning opportunities and parity of experience?

- 'Everyone is a teacher of writing' – yes – but should they be? (given constraints of the 'field' + variations in capital)

- Given this level of variation in beliefs, positions and practice, what should we do about it? Reflection and discussion? Staff development?

- Who should be involved in the provision of essay feedback? Collaboration with language experts?

Select bibliography

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