http://doi.org/10.35847/JKubiak.8.3.17

Research Article

"I Write Outside of Here": Adult Learners' Writing Networks and Experiences of Corrective Instructor Feedback

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Abstract

As U.S. institutions of higher education increase opportunities for adults to earn short-term, job-ready credentials, more learners will have access to college-level writing coursework without basic or developmental prerequisites. With this access comes the risk of corrective feedback on language use, a process that may be felt as painful or even violent. This article details findings from a study that explored how adult learners at a rural, open-access community college experience such feedback. Thirty students responded to focus group and interview questions about corrective feedback received in the context of first-year composition. Findings focus on participants' daily reading and writing practice, digital mediation of feedback, and the friends, family, and peers who support participant writing. These elements of adult learners' writing networks contribute to the framework through which learners experience feedback, perhaps explaining why participants' emotional experience of corrective feedback on their language use was not prominent in their discussion of feedback encounters. Implications exist for instructional design that leverages learners' existing practices and supports.

Introduction

Community colleges often function as an adult's steppingstone back into formal education and training. With dual missions supporting both prospective transfer students and students seeking career programs such as practical nursing and welding, these open-access institutions offer both credit and non-credit pathways to immediate employment. Increasingly, students can complete industry-driven formal credentials in one semester of full-time study, with adult learners further incentivized by the prospect of earning credit for prior learning. Efforts within the field of developmental education have further cleared the way for students to complete short-term, post-secondary credentials in months. Specifically, corequisite literacy reforms have meant more "under-prepared" learners are beginning their post-secondary journeys in college-level writing coursework, bringing with it opportunity for expedited training but also the potential for negative experiences that come with critical feedback on language use.

This potential for negative experience with feedback on adult learners' language prompted me to study adult first-year writing students at a multi-campus, open-access community college in southwestern New York State. My IRB-exempted study used focus group methodology to explore the experience of corrective feedback with 30 community college students enrolled in first-year writing coursework. Though I posited that corrective feedback encounters might be experienced as a kind of violence against learners' identities, findings point to a nuanced experience for adult learners situated in a unique literacy network.

Context and Literature Review

Historically, students deemed "under-prepared" for college-level math and English courses have been placed

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via timed, standardized assessments into developmental coursework; these classes, considered "pre-collegiate," do not count toward program completion. Placement into pre-requisite, non-credit-bearing courses may extend the time required to complete what should be single-semester micro-credentials or one-year certificates by up to 100%.

In recent years, completion of fast-track, employment-focused training and education within intended shorter timeframes has become more feasible for under-prepared learners as a result of corequisite efforts. Corequisite models, championed primarily among literacy and numeracy practitioners in community college English and Math departments, allow under-prepared learners to enroll directly in college-level, credit-bearing coursework when those learners enroll concurrently in targeted support courses (Kubiak, 2022). Likewise, where trades-focused courses require demonstrated reading ability, corequisite support courses in literacy skills make way for learners to enroll in both trades-focused coursework and reading support coursework at the same time. In this way, students who would have required an entire semester of non-credit, pre-collegiate coursework prior to beginning employment-focused coursework can now make progress at the same rate as peers deemed "college-ready."

As such, the research and practice of writing studies—as manifested in college-level reading and writing instruction—is now tied up with college transition studies more than ever. A specific point of concern I have arrived at through a lens of adult literacy and writing studies regarding adult learners' experience is how learners' identities and markers of identity are supported or challenged as a result of instruction, a concern that cuts across fields that focus on adult literacy learners.

One thread of scholarship within the field of writing studies and aligned disciplines is concerned with affective response to language use and its correction. Though research on the affective experience of language correction has largely been limited to the experience of the hearer—typically instructors (e.g., Dowden et al., 2013) but also more broadly (e.g., Alim, 2023)—less attention has been paid to the experience of the *person being corrected*. Throughout my years teaching developmental and college-level English, I have grown increasingly concerned about the nature of that experience, especially among learners whose primary discourses present as non-standard. This study focuses on adult first-year composition (FYC) learners at my rural, primarily White, northern Appalachian, open-access community college and their experience of having their written language use corrected.

This project is therefore partly about the way I approach my work as a practitioner of adult literacy in the context of FYC instruction. For most of my career I heeded Delpit's (1992) call to teach learners the language of power, arming them with the turns of phrase and grammatical "correctness" that ensure access to wherever they want to be in life. At the same time, I have seen learners' identities dismantled by formal literacy and language instruction. I have wondered for the last several years, how do we adult literacy instructors strike a balance between empowering learners and respecting their primary discourses? And how do we teach a dominant/dominating discourse of power when, on the one hand, that discourse is entrenched and evolving glacially (Devitt, 1989), and on the other, it is a moving target that seems to follow the whims of the powerful and privileged (Bourdieu, 1991)?

More precisely I wondered: How do adult, "native" English-speaking FYC students report their experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use? Scholars from across sociolinguistics and literacy and writing studies have signaled what they believe this experience is like for various populations of learners. Stuckey (1991), Smitherman (1995), Worsham (1998), McCarty and Watahomigie (2001), Bridwell-Bowles (2003), Strickland and Crawford (2003), Bartholomae (2005), Lyiscott (2017), Myers (2019), Inoue (2020), Baker-Bell (2020), and others have pointed to the pain associated with literacy and language learning, with several suggesting that this pain is tantamount to a kind of violence. Scholars across disciplinary contexts have contended with this and similar conclusions to varying degrees.

Within the fields of foreign and additional language learning, a narrowing gap has been identified in research that addresses learners' emotional experiences of corrective feedback. In 2009, Garrett and Young called for additional "studies that focus on the affective responses of the learner to the language learning experience" (p. 209), noting that "few studies have examined the first-person experiences of language

learners or attempted to relate their experience of emotion to their individual successes and failures in language learning" (p. 211). Arnold (2019) suggested a decade later that "now more and more attention is also given to affective factors" (p. 11) in language learning. Azamnouri et al. (2020) confirm this, noting although emotion had been "neglected in language instruction and studies earlier" (p. 31), recent decades saw increased focus on learner emotions. Although this research gap has been closing, I posit that the affective experience of having one's home discourse corrected is different from having a newly acquired language corrected, such that conclusions drawn from this emerging research may not be applicable to the FYC population.

More limited is K–12 research focused on learner emotion in grammar and usage instruction, as most of this research focuses instead on the *efficacy* of contextualized grammar instruction (e.g., Andrews et al., 2006; Collins & Norris, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Myhill & Watson, 2014; Myhill et al., 2013). Exceptions can be found in the scholarship of critical literacy scholars such as Baker-Bell (2020), who argues the need for an antiracist Black language pedagogy by studying changes to "students' language attitudes" (p. 49) after instructional interventions on the history and culture of Black language. Her project focuses on the unique experiences of Black K–12 English education learners in the U.S., noting that "linguistic racism and oppression, especially as experienced by Black people, tend to get overlooked or are undertheorized" even in frameworks like critical race theory (p. 12). Though Baker-Bell's study focuses primarily on learners' *intellectual* reactions to corrective feedback on language use, it concludes that learners internalize negative assumptions about their identities because of how their language is policed by family, school, and communities. Baker-Bell's work confronts the experience of learners whose home discourse is corrected, but I struggle to generalize her findings to my study's population because of her K–12 setting.

Strickland and Crawford (2003) discuss the emotional experience of the FYC speaker or writer who has been, as the authors call it, "schooled" upon having their written language use corrected. The authors speculate specifically about the emotional experience of a group of Black learners they were teaching who, upon reading two writing samples, were unable to locate any value in the sample composed with Ebonics. Learner emotions proposed by the authors include shame, embarrassment, and disgust. Though Strickland and Crawford's work addresses the population and phenomenon I wish to explore, they did not directly ask learners about their emotional experiences regarding feedback on their language use.

Others within writing studies have approached the question of student experience more empirically, as seen in scholarly dialogue about FYC student *understanding of instructor response* to their writing (Bowden, 2018; Bowles, 2020; Brannon & Knobloch, 1982; Sommers, 1992; Sommers, 2006; Sommers, 2012; Straub, 1997). Some scholarship includes limited focus on FYC learners' *emotional experience of feedback in general* (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Gee, 1972; Rupiper Taggart & Laughin, 2017; Treglia, 2008), with a subset focusing on learners' *emotional experience of feedback on language use* in particular. While these latter studies come closest to exploring the phenomenon that my study focuses on, selected methodologies call into question their usefulness. The most common method of data collection about learners' experiences is closed response survey (e.g., Li & Lindsey, 2015; Rupiper Taggart & Laughlin, 2017), limiting the extent to which learners' voices shape findings.

The study I undertook in 2022, then, was an attempt to explore how such feedback is experienced by learners in their own terms. Study questions focused on adult FYC learners' emotional experiences of having their language corrected via instructor feedback, questions born of my concern regarding how corrective feedback on language use might function as a kind of instructional violence.

Methodology

The task of articulating others' potentially painful experiences isn't to be taken lightly. Therefore, I sought a methodology that would create safe opportunities for participants to narrate experiences, venues in which I could avoid imposing my assumptions. Focus groups, when designed as a constructivist method, invite collaboratively arrived-at observations, reflections, and conclusions that come about through generative and empathetic conversation about shared experiences. One argument for this methodology is its collective

nature, which suits people who might struggle to articulate their thoughts, providing collective power to marginalized people (Liamputtong, 2011, p. ix), such as "underprepared" FYC adult learners. Focus groups afford conversation among participants, and peers' presence ensures participants are not exclusively enacting the role of student vis-à-vis an instructor or other authority figure.

Harding et al. (2018) point to the following benefits of focus group methodology and data collection. They:

- Are "well suited to exploring ideas on a particular topic and the complexities of opinions and attitudes."
- "Foreground interaction between group members as they respond to, agree with, or challenge each other on different topics: co-constructing meaning and shared understandings."
- "Enable researchers to study how individuals collectively make sense of phenomena and why they feel the way they do."
- Are "more likely" to evoke "attitudes, feelings, and beliefs" because of focus groups' "more naturalistic" setting of "social gathering and interaction." (p. 12)

I aimed to take advantage of the elements of focus groups aligned with adult literacy andragogy imperatives as modeled by Vetter and Moroz's (2019) protocol and Harding et al.'s (2018) reflections. I relied on Morgan's (1996) guidance on focus groups as social science research methodology to establish the study design, supplementing this framework with Liamputtong's (2011) work and further refining it for the writing classroom context with an eye to Banks et al. (2019).

Study Protocol

The study setting was an open-access, public, two-year community college in southwestern New York State, the northern-western corner of the U.S.'s Appalachian region. The college is rurally situated, and all but about 200 of roughly 2,000 matriculated students commute. Of the four rural New York State counties with the highest "share of population in poverty" in 2020, three of these make up the college's service area, with one of the three atop that list with 16.3% of citizens living at or below the economic poverty line (New York State Comptroller, 2022).

Participants recruited for this study came from three instructional sites, each with unique contexts and different student populations. Two campus sites are located 50 miles from each other, and the extension center site is a 40-minute drive from the main campus and an 80-minute drive from the other. Student characteristics and populations differ from site to site, and local demographics make each site's context distinct. A few markers of common institutional culture can be found across the three sites, but not many, resulting in some ambiguity regarding the scope of this study and therefore its generalizability.

Some participant characteristics may influence experiences of feedback. All but a few of my study's thirty participants are *adults* as defined in ways consistent with the field of Adult Education, referring not only to non-traditional learners, but also to eighteen-year-olds with significant life experience who might otherwise be called "traditional." A related characteristic is participants' matriculation at a *community college*. Toth (2023) notes that community college learners likely share many characteristics with adult learners: both are "historically underrepresented in postsecondary education" (p. 37) and are typically first-generation college students, poor, caretakers, and workers. Finally, the participants and the site of this study are all *rurally situated*.

All matriculated students taking at least one face-to-face, campus-based FYC course were eligible for recruitment. In Fall 2022, 462 students were enrolled as such, and 309 were recruited for this study. Those enrolled in online (either asynchronous or synchronous) courses were not explicitly excluded from study recruitment, but were implicitly excluded due to a combination of COVID-19-related restrictions and study parameters.

Seven focus group sessions and three interview sessions were held during the four-week data collection period. Focus groups ranged from three to seven participants, and thirty participants engaged in focus groups or interviews. Participants ranged from 18 to 51 years old and were sorted into homologous groups based on characteristics related to gender identity, racial identity, and adulthood characteristics to increase likelihood of participant comfort. Sessions consisted of semi-structured discussions with questions designed to establish rapport, focus on FYC instruction, and identify

responses to feedback.

Data Analysis

Because I sought to convey the experiences of learners through their own voices, transcription, coding, and analysis work deemphasized any a priori frameworks. I re-read transcripts with an eye toward both initial thematic and interaction codes and my research question, which drove axial coding and thematic framework development, an approach that is distinct from grounded theory analysis as transcript coding remained open throughout the initial coding process.

Social interaction expands the material available but is not always incorporated in analysis, as focus groups are often employed as a method of efficiency, rather than a methodology of co-constructed knowledge-making. However, attention to social interaction during analysis facilitates the process of identifying thoughts that are meaningful for both the speaker and others in the group. Social interaction analysis also allows for attentiveness to dissenting opinion, especially when carried out in conjunction with thematic analysis.

Working with such multi-layered focus group data allows for a kind of immediate triangulation, what Janesick (2003) calls data "crystallization" (p. 67). Where participants come together in agreement—or express dissent—via discussion, or where participants arrive at a conclusion together, data may point more definitively to "the discourses or themes that are produced within the group context" (Liamputtong, p. 175). That is, by reading focus group data not only for discrete content but for indicators of engagement via social interaction analysis, results should provide a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon discussed.

Both discourse analysis and thematic analysis pointed to significant ideas and levels of agreement around those ideas, leading to three thematic domains consisting of twenty sub-themes. Each sub-theme's agreement factor was determined in order to locate both broadly significant issues and matters of concern to specific focus groups. To check my thematic framework, I shared domains, sub-themes, and transcript-derived examples of each sub-theme with participants three months after session completion; 30% of participants provided feedback on or affirmed initial analysis.

Findings

The question prompting this study was: How do adult, "native" English-speaking FYC students report their experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use? This question drove discussion that touched not only on this phenomenon, but on a holistic profile of what it means to be a FYC student in a post-pandemic, technology-infused, anxiety-ridden world. While data collection yielded sufficient information to support analysis and discussion of learner experience of instructor feedback, the following reflects what participants brought to the focus group table.

The findings shared here reflect what I posit is a unique experience for adult learners in FYC instructional contexts. Participants recounted emotional experiences of feedback ranging from positive to negative, but for these learners, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps feedback in general) is only one element of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors experienced in their writing lives. In particular, of the twenty sub-themes that I developed in analysis, seventeen speak more to the material, the procedural, and the familial than to participant emotions about instructor corrective feedback on language use. These sub-themes—three of which are unpacked below—are not distractions from the matter of adult learner experience of feedback. Rather, they are elements of the framework *through which* learners experience that feedback.

Reading and Writing in Daily Lives

One sub-theme is participants' reading and writing for non-academic purposes. Reading as a discrete activity was introduced by participants as a point of explanation for their general attitude toward FYC. Additionally, several shared that they not only maintain vigorous daily writing practices but have developed strategies for composing, both of which have been cultivated outside the confines of formal writing instruction.

Nicole detailed her consumption of various media and other sources of linguistic input, along with how she sees that language consumption positively benefitting her vocabulary, a result of intentional practice:

> I think I have a wide vocabulary because I read a lot every day. Like, I try to learn something new every day. On top of that, I listen to a lot of music, and it's not just the same type of music. It's different music, so different

> words, I always hear, it's coming to me. And I pay attention to what people say. So like, if somebody says something, that will stick with me, then boom, I learned a new word just like that. And then I really try to read signs, posters, just little stuff like that, because I know, reading the littlest stuff, really expand[s] your vocabulary. But I really think it's music 'cuz I know a lot of music. And it's just, yeah, helps me with my vocabulary, I feel like.

More effusive was participants' enthusiasm for writing in their non-academic lives. Some emphasized specific kinds of writing, and some pointed to the relevance of academic genres to daily life, while most gestured generally to the fact that they write outside of academic contexts. Some participants introduced their affinity for writing after commenting on their experience in FYC. One shared: "Some of my other English classes are more literature focused, but this one has just been writing and I like writing a lot." Another indicated that they liked composing a process analysis in FYC, pointing out "how applicable it is," because of its daily application. Others share, while talking about FYC, that they "love rhetoric" or "like think pieces."

Most participants who spoke about daily reading and writing didn't anchor these practices in terms of academic experiences. In the following, Jane does the opposite:

> ME: You've mentioned this phrase "writing voice" a few times.
>
> JANE: Yes.
>
> ME: So that seems like something that you value a lot.
>
> JANE: For sure. Yeah. Because I write outside of, outside here.

I later learned that Jane's FYC class and affiliated workshop both took place in the classroom where our focus group was held. Jane's "here" can be read as the classroom where writing instruction takes place, or as college in general.

Other participants located their writing practices outside of academic settings, providing specific information about what they write. Lily discussed one endeavor:

> The only other time I've written a story was for my friends. And I'm still technically writing it but it's not finished yet. I'm writing them a fairytale novel -- not really a novel, just a little thing, but I'm writing it for them.

Though Lily clarified the description of what she was writing, this self-correction points to a desire to define the genre in which she was working. Ultimately, the technicality regarding whether this was a story or a novel became unimportant, as Lily broadened (yet minimized) her description, calling it "just a little thing" before re-emphasizing her work's intended audience.

Beyond expressing positive stances toward reading and writing, participants drew connections between those practices and college-sponsored literacy work of FYC. They sought to define the reading and writing they engage in outside of formal reading and writing instruction, and they reported mutual benefits across the settings in which they read and write. One implication, then, is that opportunity exists to extend established significant reading and writing practices into formal instructional efforts, with instruction inviting learners to reflect on the reading and writing they already do, leveraging that existing practice for the sake of formal instruction. For instance, Lily's alertness to audience and genre would provide an ideal framework for full-class discussion about rhetorical awareness. Such an emphasis on existing understanding can go beyond instructional sequencing, and may influence revision of programmatic or course-level student learning outcomes, which could include translation of the non-academic to the academic. Taken a step further, instructional efforts might be fully reshaped to focus on the literacy events that learners themselves know are most critical in their lives.

In terms of corrective feedback on language use, this finding suggests that participants were alert to the kinds of linguistic inputs that prompt language learning. As such, alternatives to corrective feedback on language use could include assigning learners to track observations regarding language they see and use daily.

Technology

A second sub-theme is technological mediation. When discussing instructor feedback, participants spoke about digital technologies mediating feedback encounters, often at the expense of more substantial discussion about feedback content or emotional experience of that feedback. Overall, corrective feedback's digital technological mediation is viewed by participants either as a hindrance to engaging with feedback or as a neutral yet evident framework for the feedback experience.

One participant announced mid-focus group that they were logging in to the college's learning management

system (LMS) in order to share instructor feedback verbatim. Orpheus's report touches on both the content of instructor feedback and the experience of accessing LMS-mediated comments.

> ORPHEUS: I was just opening Brightspace. Just to remember all the feedback, 'cuz uh we get our essays and anything we sent basically sent back to us, along with a comment, and then [the instructor] will go in to the actual essay, and highlight things or add a comment, being like, "This should be a comma," or like, "I didn't get what you get here," and mainly just being like, "Hey, add clarification," [or], "I would like to see more ethos here," or, "Explain more." Just stuff like that.

Orpheus introduced the LMS-specific process of accessing and understanding instructor feedback, including a holistic comment appearing to the side of the marked-up essay, the essay itself, points highlighted within the essay, and point-specific comments that appeared some other way. While Orpheus did not seem bothered by the technologies used to dispense or read feedback, their description of that feedback event is heavily framed by imagining an instructor's actions relative to digital tools.

The various feedback delivery modes and functions used by instructors didn't seem to faze several participants, who rattled off where and how they accessed feedback, as well as how that feedback appeared. Like Orpheus, Sage referenced the college's LMS: "Let's see, my professor, they do the comments. Like when we turn the essay into Brightspace, they do it in the comments." Equally prevalent were references to cloud-based document management systems, as indicated by Jane: "Um, so we email and then they'll just leave a comment, like right, like through Google to the doc. And then you just open the doc and it's there. They'll highlight it, and then they'll write on it."

On occasion, the use of digital technology for submitting work and accessing feedback was seen as an obstacle. Max shared this frustration, calling it "irritating," and saying, "It's hard to get past." Such commentary was typically followed by expressed desire for "physical" assignments and feedback. One focus group bemoaned the difficulty of accessing LMS-housed feedback, sharing that they struggled to locate feedback. One noted, "I click on everything," a striking and likely familiar-sounding description of the embodied experience for both faculty and learners as they navigate the digitally-mediated feedback encounter.

At times, the LMS-mediated nature of instructor feedback on grammar and language not only influenced learner understanding of the feedback itself, but it also seemed to trump any instructive element of feedback content.

> SAGE: Oh, yeah. I got feedback on that, like, run on sentences, I had a lot in one of my essays.
>
> ME: What did that feedback look like?
>
> SAGE: Um...
>
> ME: Like, how did your instructor communicate that to you?
>
> SAGE: They put it in a box to where the sentence led on. So.
>
> ME: Did you have a sense of what to do about it after the instructor pointed it out to you?
>
> SAGE: Kinda, kind of not.

Such exchanges touch on both feedback modality and feedback perceived as non-instructive. Whether Sage's uncertainty about what to do with instructor feedback regarding run-on sentences use was a function of that feedback's LMS-constrained design and digital mediation isn't clear.

Variability in feedback technology played a role in participants' discussions of feedback experiences. For some, comments regarding feedback technologies led to group comparison, including a protracted discussion among five participants about one group member's feedback. Sammy had announced that the feedback received on her latest essay was limited to "grammar errors" without further explanation or instruction. The discussion that ensued focused on determining whether instructor feedback was in fact limited and general, or whether Sammy was simply not finding additional feedback on the LMS.

> SAMMY: Um, I don't know. This just says, "Essay meets all expectations, but there's grammar errors," and that's the only comment I have.
>
> ORPHEUS: What?
>
> MULTIPLE: <overlapping talk> "Wait," "No way," "I can," "I think."
>
> ORPHEUS: Is this for your whole essay?
>
> NICOLE: Yeah, [our instructor] doesn't do a lot of commenting.
>
> SAMMY: This is my, this is my only comment. So I don't know.
>
> NICOLE: [Our instructor] doesn't comment a lot.

> SAMMY: This is all I have.
>
> ALEXIS: What did you get on the essay?
>
> ORPHEUS: No, wait, okay
>
> SAMMY: An 82.
>
> ALEXIS: Ok so there has to be more that you did wrong.
>
> ORPHEUS: No wait, wait. Do you want to see the feedback you should be getting? It should look like this.
>
> SAMMY: I don't think I get any of this.
>
> MICHELLE: Is it inline?
>
> NICOLE: Oh, I don't get papers like that.
>
> ORPHEUS: Yeah, I get the full thing like this.
>
> MICHELLE: The whole thing like that, yeah.

While Nicole, who has the same instructor, responds on Sammy's behalf, the rest of Sammy's fellow focus group participants are concerned and indignant on her behalf. Here, the digitally-mediated nature of FYC feedback prompts confusion, uncertainty, points of comparison, and the need for clarification. Nicole's justification for a perceived lack of instructor feedback, Orpheus's distress, and Alexis's sympathizing might suggest the pervasiveness of this kind of experience.

The sub-theme of technology as a hindrance to successful learner engagement with FYC via feedback was prominent in this study. One implication of this finding is the need to be alert to the limitations of technology-mediated feedback, and to the fact that learner engagement with this feedback may be conceived of not in terms of its content but in terms of the tool used. Therefore, when helping students recall specific pieces of feedback, instructors may wish to begin by describing not *what* was shared through feedback, but *how* it was shared (e.g., in a comment attached to a specific highlighted phrase). Additionally, instructors who rely on such mediated feedback should consider incorporating some analog feedback encounters. For instance, especially given the persistence required to access such feedback, post-feedback instruction might include modeling how to access and engage with feedback. And regardless of technologies used to share feedback, instructors should consider creating mechanisms for learners to confirm receipt of and respond to feedback with clarifying questions.

Family, Friends, and Other Peers

Finally, people who are not formally associated with writing instruction are introduced across participant contributions. Though some feature as obstacles to successful composing (including infant nephews who turn off computers mid-sentence), individuals in participants' lives are largely reported as playing significant, positive, and active roles in learners' experience of feedback on their writing, both personal and academic.

Orpheus reported an established sequence of working with instructor feedback and then seeking additional feedback from others:

> I usually have my draft feedback and then I send it off to my foster sister, who also looks over my essays. And then I get feedback from her and usually I have someone else also read over it. I have like, thousands of people look after and be like, "Okay," and, "It's good." Usually the content's always good. It's just the grammar and spelling that needs fixing and, not from my teacher, but I always get the comment from my foster sister being like, "Commas won't hurt you! Use them more." Which I think is very funny, because I usually remove some commas. 'Cuz I'm like, "This seems like too many…"

Noteworthy here is not only that Orpheus actively seeks feedback from such a large number of non-FYC-affiliated people, but that they have a clear sense of how their writing is typically received by others. Orpheus's note about content versus grammar and spelling includes a careful distinction about where this bit of corrective feedback comes from: not an instructor, but a sibling.

Indeed, most references to feedback received from family members and others involved grammar or punctuation correction, such as this from Sammy: "I just make my roommate read my essays 'cuz she's really smart. She fixes them. Like she puts the words in and everything." More rare were cases where learners' networks provided more conceptual support: "I reach out or I talk to one of my buddies who knows what they're doing because I need to know exactly what I'm doing or I can't do it." Here, Walker notes his tendency to stall on or not complete writing assignments before identifying someone within his network who functions as a bridge to FYC assignment expectations.

One participant reported experiencing various kinds of affective engagement with instructor feedback during focus group discussion. Here, Jane reports an ambivalent emotional response to having her language use

commented on with specific but non-evaluative feedback, and in the process touches on all of the elements addressed above and more.

> ME: What about other feedback on your language use?
>
> JANE: Um, for my language use? No, but they said mine's very different. Like, instead of, "however," I use, like, "consequently." [The instructor] says it's just a very different way. They said they've never really seen that before. So I'm not really sure if that's good or bad. But they just say I have a different way of explaining things.
>
> ME: How did that make you feel?
>
> JANE: Good and bad because I'm not like everybody else, I guess, because we are allowed to read other students' [writing] through our websites. So I don't know if that struck [my instructor] as like, "Wow." Or should I be concerned? But they had left me "excellent" on my rubrics, so I'm assuming that I'm doing okay. But that's generally my writing voice. And I'm not going to change it for somebody, right? You know, yeah, I will improve but I won't change it.

Jane responded first to my explicit inquiry about feedback on language use and then to my follow-up question about any feelings she had in response to that feedback. Though Jane at first responded that she hadn't received any feedback on her language use, she then recalled with specific detail the feedback her instructor had given on her language use. Perhaps because this was more of an observation as opposed to a bit of correction or advice, this didn't register as feedback as such. Further, left without a sense of what this feedback indexed regarding her instructor's feelings, Jane herself seemed unsure how to feel. She's first unsure if the feedback *is* "good or bad," and, perhaps consequently, she's then left *feeling* "good and bad."

Learners' networks of writing practice and support include college peers, but also family, friends, and others not formally connected to instruction. One potential implication of this is that the role of the instructor in the experience of writing instruction and practice is relatively limited, as instructor feedback is modulated as a result of other elements of these networks. Specifically, adult learners may have a cultivated, well-established network of peers who read, comment on, copyedit, and otherwise correct their writing. This finding calls into question, then, one of the primary functions of the classroom peer review process. While non-adult learners may require instructor-driven peer feedback events for the sake of prompting revision, this may be less necessary for adult learners. Likewise, this finding establishes the fact that even if an instructor wishes to withhold sentence-level feedback early in the writing process, adult learners may seek corrective feedback via their established networks. Rather than discourage such interactions, instructors might leverage learners' networks by asking learners to establish specific goals for these interactions. Crafting explicit goals and outcomes for network engagement may provide a sense of ownership of the writing process for learners, in a way that can extend to other resources, including generative AI tools.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings suggest that for the adult FYC learners at one rural, open-access community college, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps in general) is only one component of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors. To my question of whether participants experience corrective feedback as a kind of violence, the answer is "no." However, one potential reason for this is that corrective feedback encounters are experienced through the lens of writers' broad literacy networks, which themselves may include other sources of corrective feedback and established beliefs about language and feedback.

One pair of generalizations made by adult learning theorists is that adult learners are more self-motivated and have more critical demands on their time and attention than non-adults. The demographic realities that make these likely—caretaking responsibilities, employment status, and chronological age—are likewise found among community college learners. The implications of being a community college-attending adult, then, are already significant: learners are likely to have major demands on their time and energies, sometimes leading them to deprioritize the obligations that come with formal learning. However, the sources of these non-academic demands—family, work, healthcare, etc.—may also function as *resources* for meeting formal learning obligations. Compounding and refining these likelihoods are the unique material and ideological realities that come with living and learning in rural U.S. contexts. Though ruralness manifests differently, historical and contemporary relationships among literacy education, higher education, and the rural U.S. are fraught. As I found

through this study, these factors may shape learners' experience of corrective feedback on language use, both in terms of how learners perceive instructor feedback and regarding the network of supports and resources learners have at their disposal.

This finding supports Toth's point regarding what she calls the ecological realities of two-year college transfer learners: "alongside-school identities are often embedded in relationships, forms of cultural participation, sources of motivation, and access to financial and other resources that sustain students as they pursue their degrees" (p. 37). Indeed, findings suggest that learners' writing ecosystems interact with instructor feedback encounters, and that participants' situatedness as adult learners at an open-access, rural community college is an important component of their "experiences and social networks" (p. 56). That is, adult learners in these rural FYC contexts draw upon complex networks of factors that are "self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic" (p. 4) in ways that reflect Syverson's (1999) definition of writing ecologies.

Indeed, adult learners' writing ecosystems offer additional feedback sources and frames of reference for instructor feedback. For example, despite an absence of the singular emotional reaction I expected to elicit, Jane's response to my question, "How did that make you feel?" included an array of elements located within her writing ecosystem: peers, digital portfolios, instructional texts, and uncertainty about her instructor's emotions. Her "neutral" emotional response to instructor feedback on language use points to the idea that in the face of so many factors common to the adult learner, feedback encounters themselves feel less significant than we might expect.

Ultimately, Jane's response to my question about feelings illustrates that even feedback on language use that isn't discernible as feedback nevertheless reverberates among the various elements of adult learners' writing ecosystems. In the case of rural community college-attending adult learners, these reverberations (a) mobilize learners' long-standing beliefs and attitudes about themselves, language, feedback, and writing, and (b) are refracted by learners' existing writing supports, experiences, and practices. The literate lives of adult FYC students are expansive and nuanced in ways that may not only shape learners' emotional experiences, but should shape the work of instruction. Though responses to questions about learners' emotional experience of corrective feedback may be nonexistent, nondescript, or speculative, this may be a function of how relatively minor such feedback encounters feel in the face of so many other factors, and emotional reactions may be more a function of the writers' broad and networked literacy contexts than the feedback itself.

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