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Formative interaction in online writing: making disciplinary expectations explicit

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Chapter 12. Formative interaction in electronic written exchanges:

fostering feedback dialogues

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Introduction

In this chapter formative feedback is examined within asynchronous exchanges between

native and non-native English speaking (NS and NNS) Master's students using computer

conferencing software. The different styles of peer and tutor interaction in three tutorial

groups are observed to promote different levels of discussion and reflection on content and

academic writing. We analyse how the tasks set and the tutors' input influence the

development of these interactions and the degree of critical reflection exhibited by students

in their feedback to each other. From these case studies we argue that asynchronous

computer mediated communication (CMC) has the potential to help students in learning the

disciplinary norms of a new area of study in terms of content knowledge, expression and

epistemology. Whether this potential is realised is influenced by the role the tutor adopts

and the tasks that are set. It is these aspects that we examine in detail through an analysis of

feedback.

Much of the literature on learning highlights the importance of talk or dialogue particularly

as a way of scaffolding (Bruner 1986) learning. Here, we foreground the potential for

written CMC to scaffold understanding of not only disciplinary knowledge learning, but

also disciplinary writing characteristics. The relative permanency of CMC, in contrast to

ephemeral face-to-face discussions, allows opportunities for students to reflect on

contributions already posted to a conference, and to consider and revise their own

contributions before posting them to a group. In addition, with prompting from the tutor, students can be encouraged to evaluate their own and others' writing in terms of disciplinary expectations and to feed back that evaluation. At Master's level, such metacognitive reflection on learning and writing processes can raise to consciousness what is acceptable in terms of knowledge claims and evidence and how these may be expressed within a subject area.

We begin by briefly reviewing some of the literature on learning as a dialogic process and then discuss this in relation to knowledge about educational interaction using CMC. The central part of the chapter is an analysis of tutor and peer feedback with an emphasis on how the interventions of the tutors influence the level of critical engagement and reflection on writing and the discipline. We draw out areas of significance for those using CMC within their own teaching.

Dialogue and computer facilitated learning

Our starting point for examining CMC is that interaction *per se* provides the possibility that some form of learning will take place. Support for this view comes from both educational theorists and linguists. Vygotsky (1962) privileges speech in the development of thinking, Halliday (1994) emphasises language more generally. Gee (1990; 1994), in taking a sociocultural/sociohistorical foregrounds the importance of interaction within his concept of 'Discourses'. We therefore take as a foundation that dialogue, whether face-to-face or computer enabled, can facilitate, or scaffold, the process of learning. There are, however, influences from the electronic medium which make some fundamental differences. Clearly, in asynchronous CMC there is a lack of visual or aural clues about participants and their views, a time delay in receiving responses and feedback, and a need for at least moderately

good writing skills. On the other hand, it has been argued that it provides time and space for participants to reflect on their own thoughts and ideas and those of others (Lea, 2001; Light et al., 1997; Wilson and Whitelock, 1998). It can create a safe site for students to try out ideas, to co-operatively brainstorm problems, and to rehearse the articulation of their thoughts (Belcher 2001: 145). It can enable those who are more hesitant in face-to-face situations, particularly those NNSs socialised to be quiet in class, to join in (Warschauer 2002). A number of studies have also pointed out the influence of CMC on argumentation processes with several researchers claiming that by providing the text of messages in a form that can be reviewed and manipulated, asynchronous electronic conferencing aids the articulation, critique and defence of ideas (Harasim 1989; Henri 1995; Lea 2001).

Not all the research has been clear cut in pointing to the educational benefits from interaction using computers. On argumentation, Marttunen and Laurinen (2001) found that during email discussions students learnt to identify or choose relevant grounds for an argument, but that face-to-face discussions improved their skills in putting forward counterarguments. The ability to encourage NNSs or more hesitant speakers to participate has been questioned by Goodfellow (2004). For some students, it is not the language but the style of interaction which can cause problems (Hara and Kling 1999; Lea et al. 1992). Participants may deliberately or unwittingly subvert conference discussions; what to some may be a legitimate challenge which can aid learning (Tolmie and Boyle 2000) may seem to others a threat to face.

The lack of agreement on the educational benefits of CMC may be due, in part, to its relative newness. Unlike the classroom or other face-to-face situations to which we all bring years of socialisation, CMC is a relative newcomer within education and is still rapidly

evolving; thus, it represents a situation which students and tutors alike are learning to handle. In this study, we show how feedback within CMC can promote reflection on both disciplinary content and its associated literacies and foster an inclusive and supportive learning community. We argue that the interpersonal dimension, and particularly the role of the tutor, is significant in influencing the dynamics of the conference in order for reflection to come about (c.f. Light et al. 2000).

Our concern for written interaction moves us away from a focus on writing as a skills issue for NNSs. Rather, at this level, we see academic writing or literacy, both CMC and traditional essays, less as a matter of correct grammar and relevant content knowledge, and more as helping students to understand and enter into the ways of 'knowing' sanctioned by the academy and by their discipline (Becher 1994; Hewings 2004; Hyland 2000; MacDonald 1994; Myers 1990). Students need to grasp what constitutes knowledge and evidence and how to express this within disciplines. Difficulties in accomplishing this can affect both NS and NNS students. In recent years within higher education there have been calls for academic and disciplinary expectations to be made more explicit particularly as more non-traditional students move through the system (Coffin et al. 2003; Gee 2000). Lillis (2001) has suggested that one way of doing this is to replace traditional feedback with 'talkback.' She likens this to exploratory talk (see also Mercer 2000) which is aimed at 'opening up discussion and …[moving] away from a tutor-directed talking space'(Lillis 2001: 10). This provides a useful way of characterising what we might be aiming to achieve in conferencing interactions.

What we mean by 'feedback'

We consider feedback broadly as that part of a dialogue which acknowledges, comments on, or extends the discussion of academic content or its expression. Like the typical initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence noted by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) in classroom discourse, feedback in our CMC data is identified in part by its position in the interaction. However, although traditionally associated with evaluation, our conception of successful feedback is as a positive strategy with the aim of expanding dialogue as a means to extend students' thinking. It is important in both interpersonal and experiential domains - creating a co-operative and supportive learning community as well as focusing on content. Feedback is often a building block where a student's understanding can be acknowledged and built upon to encourage deeper reflection. The written nature of asynchronous conferencing creates time and space for this reflection. However, the degree to which these opportunities are taken up appears to be strongly influenced by the tasks students are set and by the type of feedback model provided by tutors.

There is some evidence that tutors and students have different views on the role of the tutor and importance of feedback in the CMC environment. Collaborative learning prioritises peer interaction based on tasks designed by a tutor adopting a facilitator role (Thorpe 2002). However, this backgrounding of the teacher role does not satisfy some students who wish for feedback not from peers but from their tutor (Jones et al. 2000, Lea 2001). An alternative model is Salmon's (2003) view of conferencing as a series of stages where the tutor role evolves as the independence of the students increases. In the data presented below we see a number of these different views.

The research aims and context

The research reported here is part of a larger project[1] (see Painter et al. 2003 for a summary) designed to investigate the effect of different tutorial tasks on the way students in a globally available Master's course in TESOL put forward disciplinary-based arguments in CMC and in subsequent traditional written assignments. In this specific project our primary aim was to see how particular types of feedback can support a deepening awareness of the academic conventions of argumentation needed in both CMC as well as traditional essay writing. In particular, we wanted to encourage awareness and reflection on the disciplinary expectations of applied linguistics with regard to putting forward and supporting opinions. We observed the effect of highlighting argumentation in the conference discussions as a means of rehearsing the language expected in the traditional essay assignments that students need to write.

The participants in this study were all working or studying with the Open University, the United Kingdom's biggest university with over 150,000 mainly part-time students studying at a distance. The data come from one of three modules that form a globally presented Master's level distance learning programme in applied linguistics. Teaching was conducted using a mix of print materials, videos and audio cassettes. Tutorials took place using asynchronous electronic conferencing which allowed the posting of messages to the conference at any time and which could be read and responded to at any time.

Each tutor group was generally between 10 and 18 students. The students were a mixture of UK-based and continental European-based NS and NNS English language teachers. Although their proficiency in English was excellent there was variation in their

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[1] The research was supported by grants from the Open University Learning and Teaching Innovation Committee.

understanding of the writing requirements of applied linguistics. The tutors initiated tasks to be completed using the computer conference, participated in the conference discussions to a greater or lesser degree, were available to answer individual queries via email, and also marked and commented on assessed work. Six tutorials were conducted using the commercially available *FirstClass* software. Messages were retained in the conference for the duration of the course.

Three tutors volunteered to allow us to collect the messages posted during two of their computer mediated tutorials. All were tutoring the course for the second time and were experienced subject specialists. Only one tutor (for Group C) had had significant CMC teaching experience for the Open University before beginning to work on this course. In this chapter we are only reporting on the interaction that took place during the first tutorial for each of the three groups, A, B and C, as this was the only mandatory CMC element of the course. The tutorials took place over approximately two weeks, and students' interactions in the conference formed part of the first summative assessment which also included an essay on second language acquisition. In addition to the tutorial conferences we also sent online questionnaires to all tutors and students involved in the course during the year.

The tutor for Group A was given no specific instructions beyond those that all tutors for the course received. He provided the general instruction that students should introduce themselves to the group and describe from their own experiences a problem in language learning and a factor relevant to success. They should then respond to another student's posting, giving their own views.

In Group B, the tutor was specifically asked to draw the attention of his students to the putting forward of (valid) arguments during the conference and it was left to his judgement how to do this. We expected that this would lead to greater involvement in the discussion by the tutor and our interest was in how students might be supported by his discursive interventions. The tutor invited students to give an example of their experience of a 'problem' and a 'joy' in learning a language. These problems and joys were the focus of our analysis.

For Group C, four specific tasks were designed by us in collaboration with the tutor. These tasks were intended to provide scaffolding for the assignment through the provision of structured activities that would rehearse argumentation skills including the sourced provision of evidence, and increase students' conscious understanding of the nature of the requirements of academic argumentation. The tasks will be outlined in the discussion of this group below.

Analysis framework

In order to isolate peer and tutor feedback, each tutorial conference was analysed in terms of initiations, responses and feedback. This allowed us to see whether and how feedback led to a continuation of the learning interaction. The setting out of the task that students were to undertake during the conference was categorised as the primary initiation. There followed initial responses from students. Feedback then came both from the tutor commenting on the students' responses and from the students commenting on each others' messages. Feedback postings were complex and often included text copied from earlier messages, comments on the messages and follow-up questions. As such they had the potential to extend the dialogue and exploration of the topics. Tutors and peers were able to encourage others, endorse their views or experiences through supplying experiential information, probe aspects of what had

been said, and challenge remarks that were not clear or did not apply to all situations. As feedback was essentially a part of the ongoing dialogue, it also often served to initiate subsequent responses. These different purposes were captured through our qualitative analysis of the interactions. Below we trace the development of CMC exchanges during the first tutorial with an emphasis on how tutor feedback influenced the interpersonal nature of peer interaction and reflection on disciplinary argumentation and academic writing. We focus in particular on those tutor roles and strategies which fostered richer dialogue, creating more opportunities for reflection and peer feedback as these provide indications of how to promote 'talkback'.

Findings and Discussion

Our findings led us to concentrate on how feedback:

- o   supported the interpersonal side of interactions in CMC;
- o   helped to extend and expand the learning dialogue;
- o   aided reflection on personal experience and academic content - moving from the personal to the abstract.

These last two points are particularly relevant to the development of argumentation skills as we shall demonstrate.

The tutor groups reported on here were all focusing on the topic of second language learning and all three tutors aimed to create a welcoming and supportive community. Beyond these basic similarities each tutor used contrasting strategies and tasks to stimulate discussion around the topic and took up different roles vis-à-vis their students thereby creating different types of interactional space for students to respond to each other.

In Group A the tutor focused on creating a symmetrical power structure. He initiated the tutorial activity, welcomed students and their ideas, but then took a backseat role. This left the floor open to the students to discuss matters and give peer feedback, an opportunity which was only minimally exploited. In terms of stimulating interaction, this strategy was not highly successful with the average number of posts per student being much lower than for either of the other two groups (Table 1).

	Group A	Group B	Group C
No. of student contributors	29[2]	15	18
Student messages	80 posts	87 posts	213 posts
Mean no. of student contributions	2.8 posts/student	5.8 posts/student	11.8 posts/student
Tutor messages	11 posts	39 posts	44 posts

Table 1: Overall participation in the tutorial conference by the three groups

The tutor's first and only substantive post after initiating the task was his own response to the task. His feedback on students' messages was welcoming but not extensive, as illustrated in example 1 which responded to the posting of past problems with pronunciation by a London-based Brazilian student. The feedback had an interpersonal element – an acknowledgement of the posting through a welcome message - and also endorsed the student's experience through reference to an earlier posting by the tutor, PK. (Note that in the examples the left hand column indicates the initials of the person who has posted the message. Quoted extracts from earlier messages are shown in bold. Typographical errors remain as in the originals. The right hand column provides a brief analysis of the text.)

Example 1

PK:	Hi J Welcome to the conference.	**Tutor feedback:** Acknowledgement

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[2] Note that for the purposes of the first tutorial Group A was a combination of two groups.

As my earlier message said, I've shared your pronunciation Endorsement of an asp
problems when learning another language.   of the student's experie
P

The reference to a shared language learning problem strengthened the interpersonal role of

the exchange without reinforcing an asymmetrical relationship between the tutor and

student and without setting up an expectation that the tutor would evaluate all postings. In

discussion with this tutor we found that he viewed his role as creating a forum that was

open and welcoming and in which the students, as autonomous adult learners, could

interact. His aim was to encourage peer interaction and not to be the arbiter for all

exchanges. This lack of a visible presence by the tutor led to little follow up interaction

between peers or between tutor and students after the initial responses and feedback. For

this reason, we will concentrate on the feedback strategies used by tutors and students in

Groups B and C.

In Group B the tutor, SJ, rarely used a feedback message to simply acknowledge a post or

welcome a student. Rather, he established an open and friendly tenor through the jokey

nature of some of his responses and, in addition, endeavoured to deepen the discussion by

asking questions which required the students to consider their experiences and views on

language learning more carefully. This probing was addressed to the whole group and thus

invited anyone to respond, not just the individual whose post had occasioned his

questioning thereby avoiding any threats to face associated with the questioning technique.

The response style modelled by the tutor also facilitated interaction by copying just that part

of a message that he was picking up on. Many of the messages were relatively short, which

meant that students did not feel the need to present carefully considered and polished prose,

but could enter and influence the debate as it moved along.

In early exchanges, SJ structured his messages in three parts; example 2 is typical. It begins with a short extract from an earlier student's message (shown in bold) and then the tutor goes on to relate this to a personal experience of his own which endorses that student's observation. He finishes with open questions to the whole group, which move the discussion away from particular personal experiences to more generalisable considerations. That this is a deliberate strategy is shown by his questionnaire comment 'I can and do try to turn conference messages more towards debate.'

Example 2

S	**Living here in the North East of England has been in some situatio like learning a whole new language and culture for me. The accen used by some individuals has been very difficult for me to unders not to mention the abundant use of idioms.**	Tutor feedback: (Extract from studen response) Acknowledgment /contextualising
	I can also attest to the difficulties of the "Wayay, hinny, I'm gang nyaer strong dialect utterances sometimes heard in the North East.	Endorsement + pers observation
	But what do you think is the motivation of the user, and what effect doe have on the non-dialect-using listener?	Open question (furth initiation)

In Group B, the use of open questions as the final part of the tutor's feedback led to students copying them as the context for their responses, thereby continuing and elaborating the discussion. Some students also used the questioning technique in their own peer feedback. Example 3 comes from a discussion thread on the difficulties of understanding different dialects of languages. This led to peer evaluation of the experiences and ideas of others, and the opening of areas for further discussion through questions.

Example 3

NE:	**"I never thought it would be so difficult to communicate in my native language."**	Peer feedback: (Extract from earlier student message) Acknowledgement/contextualising
	I agree, being a northerner and also finding "Geordie" terminology confusing or indeciphera at times I can empathize with any native speak who seems totally bewildered when trying to communicate.	Agreement/positive evaluation + perso observation to support position

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[3] "Well, that's it honey. I'm going home."

When inner circle speakers struggle to interact successfully and if the suggestions of Smith an Rafiqzad are true (the native speakers in their s were always found to be among the least intelli speakers).	Abstraction (using academic source material)
Are monolingual English speakers ultimately go to become isolated from speakers of other varie of English if a standard form of language can no introduced?	Open question

Peer feedback often included a positive evaluation such as 'I agree…,' and when questions were raised they were generally open to the whole group rather than addressed to a particular student. This strategy appeared to diminish any potential loss of face that might be implied by the question to an individual and also followed the lead set by the tutor.

Within feedback, overt challenges to opinions expressed were rare though they did occur. The tutor adapted his three part structure: quoting a student, then indicating a counter opinion and in the final part opening the discussion back up by addressing a more general question to the conference as a whole. Example 4 shows how this style of challenge was taken up and adapted by students. A student (NE) wishing to challenge another student (HJG) adopted a similar style to that of the tutor – putting forward a counter point of view in their feedback. This elicited a further feedback - support for the challenge by another student (SB). The challenged student responded by reflecting on her choice of language.

Example 4

NE:	**HJG wrote:** **…so, more advanced learners will be hungry to see man different forms and enjoy the culture of other English speakers, too.**	**Peer feedback:** (Extract from student response) Acknowledging/contextu g
	Within Arabic the opposite appears to be true… The most advanced native learners of the language aspire to master Classical Arabic which is regarded as highly complex and ve formal. (so there is little hope for us second language learner To quote an acquaintance, the language of The Holy Quran i grammatically correct and beautifully written that it's origin m be inspired. Of course I don't want to bring the discussion int realms of religion I thought that maybe this could suggest no	Challenge (counter-exam followed by generalisatio

learners wish to deviate from what is regarded as a standard
variety of language.

SB:	Greetings, N, I must agree, learning the "standard" dialect was more reassuring to me as well when studying Spanish. In my experience with Spanish, it is the form that will see you throu most situations.	**Peer feedback:** Agreement/positive evaluation + personal observation to support position (implicit challeng HJG's comment)
HJG:	I should be more tentative of course, not all learners will be hungry for different forms...perhaps the case of English toda different from Arabic though, if we think in terms of new varie Someone using English might be operating in a wide variety contexts and experiencing English from many sources. [ellips original]	**Student response:** Metacognitive reflection (considers problem of appropriate language; defends viewpoint using modalised expressions)

This type of peer interaction is illustrative of the challenging dialogue considered so useful by Tolmie and Boyle (2000), where evidence is required to support statements or claims. In this extract it leads to a deeper level of reflection on how to put forward opinions in an academic context. Another comment by the same student at around the same time: 'I must try to be more tentative with my replies in this short form of communication' indicates a concern with linguistic expression related to CMC.

The way in which the opinion is supported using the modality marker *perhaps* shows an adjustment to/learning of the rules of argumentation in this field. It is not generally acceptable to state something categorically without strong evidence and therefore markers of modality are necessary to indicate the provisionality of an opinion or claim. This is certainly the case in traditional essay assignments and it is shown to influence the CMC discussion here too. Peer challenges of this type were relatively rare in Group B, despite the modelling by the tutor.

We have argued elsewhere (Coffin and Hewings, forthcoming) that challenges are not a compulsory element of the argumentation in our data. Rather, most extended interaction on

a particular topic tended to be additive – students made supportive comments about earlier postings and then added new thoughts and examples. This resulted in a cumulative building up of evidence and experience around a topic without putting the interaction at risk through interpersonal difficulties. This was the case in both Group B and C's discussions. In Group B, the feedback style adopted by the tutor led to a high level of interactivity with reflection on concepts facilitated by the questioning technique and peer feedback. The conference, however, remained interpersonally asymmetrical as only ten questions were asked by students in contrast to 46 asked by the tutor. Of these ten questions, only five received a direct response – possibly due to their rhetorical flavour. The tutor's questions, in contrast, almost always received a response and sometimes multiple responses. Students' postings did, however, receive peer feedback which used supportive strategies such as validating their experiences through recalling a similar experience and positive feedback such as 'This is interesting'. For a less asymmetrical conference, but one that was highly interactive, we now turn to Group C where more overt efforts were made to focus attention on aspects of argumentation.

Group C had the same basic task as groups A and B, discussing factors affecting language learning, but the task itself was broken down into activities. Activity 1 required the students to brainstorm factors affecting language learning, drawing on their own experiences. It also fulfilled the function of an icebreaker, allowing students to get to know each other. Like the tutor in Group A, the tutor (PJB) in Group B tried to encourage peer dialogue by staying in the background while the students posted their experiences. He only entered the conference to respond to specific concerns, though he did give feedback to the group as a whole at the end of the first tutorial activity and before initiating the next activity. This feedback

highlighted the way the interaction had taken place and the importance he attached to

dialogue.

Example 5

PJB:	Hi,	**Tutor feedback:**
	I've been very impressed with the number of detailed argued responses to the first activity, and I'm particularly pleased to see way you've taken up certain issues to debate together. Your responses have certainly gone well beyond a simple listing of the factors which, based on personal experience, you believe affect language learning.	Positive evaluation + reason

Activity 2 focused on the academic discourse skills of reasoning, debating and supporting

claims with evidence. Students were instructed to comment, in effect give feedback, on the

messages from Activity 1 and challenge or endorse at least one of the factors put forward,

saying why they thought the factor was convincing or unconvincing. They were asked to do

this first drawing on their own experience, then on that of their peers and finally through

reference to the literature supplied on the course.

The students in this activity were careful to maintain positive relationships with each other

and most chose to endorse rather than challenge. Some, however, used an endorsement or

partial endorsement followed by a challenge on an item of detail. This pattern seemed

designed to maintain the friendly and encouraging interpersonal tenor of the conference

while at the same time enabling deeper reflection on the views of others. The activity also

supported the dialogic interaction by requiring students to read and reread the views of their

peers. The tutor in these activities shared his own experiences but did not take a stand on

those of the students.

It was notable that the challenge aspect of the peer feedback was rarely responded to. There

are two possible explanations for this. First, as the challenging feedback was from their

peers, students perhaps did not feel that they were obliged to respond. If this were the explanation it would indicate that the symmetrical interpersonal role taken by the tutor was not facilitating deeper level engagement with ideas. Second, the volume and length of messages generated may have meant that students were too overwhelmed just reading and responding to really engage in an on-going dialogue about a particular point. Students commented negatively on the amount of time required for the conferencing activities. This was subsequently evaluated as a negative aspect of the tasks designed by ourselves and the tutor.

Activity 3 posed the following questions:

> What purpose did the authors [Lightbown and Spada] have in writing about language learning? (e.g., arguing a point of view? disagreeing with other research?) What purpose did you have in talking electronically about language learning? What purpose will you have in writing about language learning in your first [assignment]?

This was designed to begin the process of metacognitive reflection, encouraging students to reflect on the different purposes of writing in different situations and using different text types, particularly with reference to how arguments are put forward and supported in an academic context. In example 6 we see a student making specific links between CMC and writing for assessment, which is evaluated positively by one of her peers. In terms of active, critical reflection, the response below would appear to indicate a successful outcome for the task, at least for this student.

Example 6

DS: **The conferencing system becomes a bit like a rough sket**   Peer feedback:
        book, or scrap paper, with comments from other people   (Extract from student
        about our own ideas. We can then reformulate our ideas   response)

taking into consideration reactions from others. **On the other hand the the purpose of writing about langu**[**age] learning becomes more formal in the [assignment]. We ar[e] able to draw on other people's experiences and ideas whi[ch] have been proposed and dissected in the conference and reformulate them into a structured argument...We can als[o] consolidate our ideas in a formal piece of writing.**	Acknowledging/contextua[lising] (demonstrating metacognitve relection o[n] conferencing and writing different genres)
I liked this analogy very much! I think you've hit the nail on the head.	Positive evaluation

However, peer feedback in general was uncommon at this stage in the conference. Activity 3 called forth detailed responses but little or no feedback on the responses of others. It was in Wertsch's (2002) terms 'extended, reflective commentary' as students had the opportunity to craft their often lengthy answers offline. As a result, the dialogic character of the conference declined for a time. Some of the reflection, however, dealt with the students' views of the activities and feedback generally and will be dealt with at the conclusion of this discussion of Group C.

The final activity focused on the linguistic realisations of argument, principally on the need to consider the position of the reader in response to arguments put forward. The instruction was:

> Find examples from the conference (a) of instances where people have put forward a statement in categorical, non-negotiable terms (b) of instances where people have put forward a statement in a way that anticipates and invites alternative perspectives.

This activity rekindled some of the dialogism of the conference as students were commenting on each others' writing. While students rarely responded to the comments of others, the postings did develop a momentum which led from listing negotiable and non-negotiable statements, to analysis of what made some statements negotiable and others not,

to discussion of disciplinary (example 7), cultural (example 8), and genre influences on

academic discourse.

Example 7

RDP: While writing…I realised I was qualifying my language. Instead (**Student feedback on**
        saying, "This is a categorical statement.", I found myself writing, **task:** Metacognitive
        seems to me etc." Maybe this was the purpose of the exercise!! reflection (personal
                                                                      observation on own wr
                                                                      practice)

Example 8

LMP: **Peer feedback:**
        …I found it much more difficult to find categorical affirmations fr Metacognitive reflectior
        participants of British origin which made me wonder whether thi (personal observation
        depends on cultural academic traditions (I'm also a British ex-pe related to academic
        After all, if we are to give any credit to Kachru's idea of concenti theorising)
        circles (Kachru B.B.,1985), some students on this course would
        belong in the 'inner circle' (native English-speaking countries su
        as Britain, U.S.A., Canada, etc.), others would be in the 'expanc
        circle' (countries where English is becoming a dominant languag
        education, science and technology) and still others would hover
        somewhere between (as far as I know nobody is from 'outer circ
        countries, like India and Kenya, where English has achieved so
        official status). So we would have differing ideas about academ
        style and form. Further implications of this are that the tutor of tl
        course, who will judge our assignments, is from the 'inner circle

These examples of feedback serve to focus attention on the way in which students were

developing awareness of how disciplinary knowledge in applied linguistic is expressed in

English medium academic contexts and how this creates difficulties for some NNS students

or those from different cultural backgrounds. Students whose ideas were discussed

benefited from feedback not just on their ideas but on how the ideas were expressed. In this

way content related and textual considerations were both subjects of careful reflection. For

all students it provided a forum to explore issues about UK academic writing conventions in

this discipline.

Feedback both by peers and by the tutor had reached a sophisticated level by this point in the conference. The overt supportive type of exchange was no longer as necessary, as all participants had had a chance to develop good working relationships through the earlier activities. The cumulative nature of these activities had acted as a scaffold to both collaborative interaction and reflective thinking. In particular, students from diverse cultural backgrounds were reflecting on their own writing and whether this was deemed appropriate in the given UK higher education context.

In passing, it is interesting to note that NNS students who expressed views via the questionnaires were positive about conferencing, with one noting that electronic tutorials were '…much easier. I had the opportunity to better express myself in English and at my own pace'. Similarly, students in Group B also gave positive feedback on the conferencing process overall, particularly the time and space given for reflection before contributing, but they did not make specific mention of academic writing skills or possible influences on their essay assignments. It seems then that while the role and feedback style adopted in Group B was successful in stimulating interaction, the specific activities in Group C may have been responsible for students' increased metacognitive reflection on disciplinary writing.

Despite what seems to have been successful interaction in Group C, particularly with peer feedback helping to deepen the discussion, there were a number of politely phrased questions and comments, particularly during the responses to Activity 3 that indicated some differences of view on feedback in line with concerns reported earlier by Lea (2001) and others.

Example 9

Tutor feedback. This bothers me the most. Not having appraisal for the activities makes

appraisal for the [assignment] an all or nothing.

Example 10

When do we get your comments on our work so that we can make things right next time? …

Others were clearly satisfied with peer feedback:

Example 11

Hello, I know I'm behind on this conference, but I would like to make a brief contribution

to Activity 2 before getting stuck into the others. I would also appreciate a little feedback

from anyone who has the time to do so. Thanks.

The comment in example 12 is less clear cut, recognising the value of peer feedback but

possibly also noting the lack of an authoritative voice. Interestingly, the student also

compares the quality of the interaction to that of face-to-face situations:

1. …reading each others comments I think gave, in a way, peer feedback. If this had only

    been a spoken debate, then maybe there would have been less quality in the information

    (because we could go away and think about our responses), more aggression in the

    arguing, noise, turn giving disputes, etc... We avoided all of these and aided motivation

    at the same time. Looking back at our initial contributions the quality has improved the

    more we have got into the topic. However the position of the tutor has not been

    supplanted by any one of us students.

It would appear that encouraging peer feedback and a symmetrical structure in CMC has to

be balanced by the students' understandable wish to know whether they are on the right

track. At one end of the spectrum we saw that Tutor A's desire to leave the floor open for

peer interaction resulted in relatively little activity and most of that remained at the level of personal experience. Tutor B was much more of a presence in his conference though he took a generally non-judgemental role in feedback. He used interpersonal strategies such as humour and open questions to the whole group to encourage participation and promote deeper and more critical reflection on key concepts. In the questionnaire survey he specifically mentioned the tensions inherent in keeping the conference 'alive' and getting it to be 'reflective'. Tutor C, like Tutor A, provided little in the way of evaluative feedback but had structured the tasks sufficiently to enable successful peer feedback and was more interventionist in the discussions, putting forward his own views and encouraging others. Although some students registered a degree of dissatisfaction with his level of input, there was an acknowledgement of the learning that had taken place and the way in which formative CMC could be built into summative assessment writing.

Summary and Conclusions

Starting from a position of valuing the role of interaction in learning we have foregrounded the potential for CMC to promote dialogic tutor and peer feedback on both subject matter and the disciplinary discourse. The written nature of asynchronous CMC provides opportunities not available in face-to-face discussions to reflect at greater leisure on content, to create, in effect, an archive of other people's thoughts and responses and to critically review content in the light of expanding awareness of disciplinary expectations. These affordances of CMC are not realised automatically and can be influenced by the tutor and by the tasks set.

As we have seen in looking at three different tutor groups, there is great variation in the types of responses and feedback. In Group A, the responses received only minimal feedback from tutor or students. In Group B, the feedback style modelled by the tutor and his frequent

postings appeared to encourage much greater peer involvement in putting forward ideas and

responding to others. The contributions were often relatively short and the overall feel of

the conference was quite dynamic. Group C tasks and tutor modelling encouraged more

reflection at the expense of the dynamism of Group B. However, as a result of the greater

reflection, students were able to consider how they were constructing disciplinary

knowledge through sharing their own experiences, commenting on published work and

unpacking the implications of the tutor's expectations. This seemed to be particularly

helpful for NNS students unfamiliar with the traditions of writing at a UK university. It

could equally well apply to any novice writer reflecting on disciplinary writing.

By focusing on peer and tutor feedback we have seen how interactivity can vary

substantially. The discussion of different tutorial styles within the same course illustrates

the diversity of practices and how these might relate to the role of the tutor and to the

structure of the activities. The analysis presented has sought to illustrate how factors

broadly within the control of the tutor may facilitate more open feedback dialogues capable

of dealing with academic literacy issues. In particular, we would highlight

- o   the need for a visible tutor presence in the conference;

- o   the value of modelling interaction and feedback styles for students to adapt;

- o   the role of open questions in encouraging dialogue without reinforcing an overly
     dominant teacher role;

- o   the feasibility of making appropriate academic writing and argumentation strategies
     a focus for learning alongside content considerations.

We note that where there was an absence of feedback the interactions analysed did not take

on the reflective or dialogic character that research suggests promotes deeper and more

critical thinking. We recognise, however, that in different contexts and at different points in the teaching and learning process, the pedagogic aims will vary and feedback may not be the priority. Additionally, we acknowledge that applied linguistics and teacher education may lend itself particularly well to reflection on content and writing. Further research is needed to investigate its applicability in other disciplines.

The successes and failures of the feedback techniques employed in the three groups, together with the type of activities undertaken, leaves us with the sense that there is great potential for CMC in encouraging both reflection on content and disciplinary writing at tertiary level. The interactions captured by this study illustrate that both NS and NNS students can support each other through the exchange of views on writing and content at a sophisticated level. Research is still required to trace the effect of formative feedback, particularly that relating to academic writing, on the students' summative assignments (see, however, Coffin and Hewings forthcoming). Much also remains to be learnt about how to refine the CMC tutorial process to promote deeper reflection without overburdening the students or the tutors with work, that is, how to promote focused dialogic interaction.

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