

## MOVES, INTENTIONS AND THE LANGUAGE OF FEEDBACK COMMENTARIES IN EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the results of an investigation into feedback commentaries provided by tutors to assignments of Masters in Education students in a pre-2002 teaching and learning institution in the UK. The methodology adopted involved a qualitative discourse analysis of fifty feedback commentaries and made use of an inter-rating procedure involving three raters to identify tutor messages. The investigation revealed three groups of 'moves' (tutor messages) in feedback. Additionally, the article argues that tutor messages can find theoretical anchor in Heron's categories of counselling interventions, and that such categories can explain tutor intentions in feedback provision. The research concludes that the use of facilitative 'moves' by tutors is a way for them to provide strong support to postgraduate students.

**Keywords:** Written feedback, move analysis, tutor commentaries, feedback in higher education

## MOVES, MAKSUD DAN BAHASA KOMENTAR UMPAN BALIK DALAM PENDIDIKAN

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini membahas hasil dari penelitian komentar umpan balik yang diberikan oleh tutor terhadap tugas-tugas dari mahasiswa Magister Pendidikan dalam institusi pra-pengajaran dan pembelajaran tahun 2002 di Inggris. Metodologi yang digunakan melibatkan analisis wacana kualitatif dari lima puluh komentar umpan balik dan menggunakan prosedur *inter-rating* yang melibatkan tiga penilai untuk mengidentifikasi pesan-pesan tutor. Investigasi ini mengungkap tiga kelompok 'moves' (pesan tutor) dalam umpan balik. Kemudian, artikel ini berpendapat bahwa pesan-pesan tutor dapat menemukan justifikasi teori dalam kategori-kategori intervensi konseling Heron, dan kategori-kategori tersebut dapat menjelaskan niat tutor dalam menyediakan umpan balik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penggunaan 'moves' fasilitatif oleh tutor merupakan satu cara untuk memberikan dukungan yang kuat pada para mahasiswa pascasarjana.

**Katakunci:** Umpan balik tertulis, analisis *move*, komentar tutor, umpan balik di pendidikan tinggi

The provision of tutor commentaries on student assignments is perceived to be a central component in processes involving feedback in higher education (Nicol 2010). And while there have been a number of investigations on the different aspects of the feedback process in recent years, the language and discourse tutors use in their commentaries on assignments remains under-researched (Weaver 2007, as cited in Walker 2009). This is surprising, considering the importance

attached to the notion of 'feedback' in terms of helping students potentially improve their future work. If the goal is to get students to use tutor commentaries to improve their future assignments, it becomes ultimately important to investigate the language of feedback. As Weaver (2007, p. 381) stressed 'if feedback is to be of any use to students, it is important to consider what messages are being conveyed.' More importantly, it becomes crucial to

determine possible intentions behind such messages.

In the field of educational studies, hardly any study explored the language of assignment commentaries. In 2000, I published the initial results of an analysis on the language of feedback used by tutors in response to assignments of MA in Education (MA Ed) students in a teaching and learning institution in the UK. While there have been a number of investigations on the different aspects of the feedback process since 2000, few researches that explored the specific context of feedback provision to assignments of MA Ed students came out. For instance, Brandt (2008), who examined tutor and peer post-teaching practice feedback as reflective conversations in the context of short intensive certificate courses in teaching, devoted a study to verbal commentaries. Other studies have focused on the use of praise and criticism (Hyland & Hyland 2001), linked the practice of feedback provision to the sociological construct of 'face' (Yelland 2011) and situated the language of feedback within academic writing contexts (Sommers 1982; Zellermyer 1989; MacDonald 1991; Lipp 1995; Conrad & Goldstein 1999; Hyland & Hyland 2006; Gascoigne 2008). Such studies seem to have relegated the importance of exploring the multiple and variable intents of tutors, and which they may have addressed within a single institutional document that students receive as summative assessment for their end-of-term submissions. As was the practice in the research site for this study, the commentaries were written in an institutional form, received by students who were already well on their way to a new semester, and had multiple audiences (i.e. can be read by other audiences as external assessors).

Ivanic et al. (2000) noted the importance of looking at tutor beliefs as it relates to how feedback is given. Weaver (2007, p. 381) stressed the same, noting that 'the way comments are worded, and the nature of the

message, is ultimately shaped by tutors' values, beliefs and understandings'. The issue of tutor beliefs in relation to how tutors see their roles in the feedback process, ultimately deserves some attention. Randall & Mirador (2003) suggested that feedback showed signs of being framed within an institutional discourse. If it is indeed institutionally framed, an analysis of tutor language can reveal disciplinary practices possibly aimed at sensitising or socialising MA in Education students to conventions being observed, inevitably providing insights into the discourse community of educational studies, and its commenting practices.

Yet again with a couple of exceptions, recent studies on commenting practices of tutors in educational studies continue to be scarce, have failed to explore how might tutors perceive their roles in the process, and how such perception can influence how they express their intentions.

Mutch (2003) pointed to an essential need for guidelines on feedback provision which should be carried out at the level of module and programme design. Brown and Glover (2006) identified a scheme consisting of six categories of comments (content, skills development, motivating, de-motivating, a mention of future study, a reference to a resource the student could use) made on assignments. Hyatt (2005) adopted a 'critical' approach in investigating the genre of written feedback and offered a 'set of functional categories' that were identified from a corpus of tutor commentaries on MA Ed assignments. The functional categories were seven types of comments (phatic, developmental, structural, stylistic, content-related, methodological, and administrative). More significantly, he argued to re-place the students at the centre of academic discourse in the process of feedback provision.

The idea of re-placing the student at the centre of academic discourse involved in feedback commentaries is important to pursue.

The notion of a ‘student-centred feedback,’ (Rudland et al. 2013) inevitably re-emphasises possible tutor beliefs about their roles in feedback provision, and how they express such roles through the comments they make and the language they use. If we can see how tutors might see their roles through their language, then we see how they position themselves in regard to their students, and explain why they write commentaries on assignments in the way they do.

In this article, I propose to view tutor language in commentaries as finding theoretical anchor on a counselling model of interventions in order to understand why tutors write comments the way they do. By investigating the language of commentaries in terms of the possible roles that tutors fulfil, we highlight the ‘education’ component of feedback, and the practices and disciplinary conventions that ‘tutors’ in higher education observe as a discourse community. The idea also lends support to the notion of feedback commentaries as a distinct genre on its own.

This article describes the results of an investigation into tutor commentaries to assignments of MA in Education students, identifies the variable intents of tutors from a linguistic perspective through an identification of tutor ‘moves’, and theorises that tutor language has a counselling focus that expresses those variable intents. Additionally, this article responds to issues raised by Yelland(2011) which tested out the model I

had earlier formulated to account for tutor messages in written feedback.

### **The notion of ‘move’**

‘Move’ is the basic analytical unit within the wider frame of qualitative discourse analysis (used by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975 on spoken text). In this article, ‘move’ is used mainly in the context of the analysis of written texts.

I had earlier attempted to define the move ‘as a logical manoeuvre that conveys the unified functional meaning of a sentence or group of sentences’ (Mirador, 2000, p. 47). I would now add to this the idea that the concept of move implies the staging of an intent, and the corresponding and ‘observable shift’ in the intent as expressed in the text by the interlocutor of the message (whether this intent is found in a t-unit, a sentence, group of sentences, or even a paragraph), hence fulfilling the rhetorical goal of the writer. This intent normally realises itself based on its relationship with the previous move and the one succeeding it. For purposes of analysis, a move becomes identifiable (and differentiated from other moves) through the ‘shift’ in functional meaning and intents. Note the example below, the differences and the shift in the intent of the writer from Move 1 to Move 2, regardless of the number of t-units or sentences contained. This text was taken from a piece of feedback given by a tutor to a postgraduate student.

*[Move 1]The coherence of your structure also enables you to move from debate on the elements of ---- through---- and into the ----- role of the-----, which is, of course, at the core of your assignment. This is achieved in a generally seamless way.[Move 2] I think you miss a trick early on, however, where you acknowledge the current emphasis on -----, but do not suggest reasons for this emphasis.*

Here, the possible intent of the tutor in Move 1 is to affirm (with a focus on content) whereas the intent in Move 2 is to confront or raise awareness about a missed point. One can

see the clear shift in intent from Move 1 to Move 2.

Specific “Moves” form part of a wider structure and each move is linked to the previous or the one that follows it in terms of

how their sequence fulfils a theme or purpose. Hence, Swales' (1990) moves in the Create a Research Space (CARS) model for article introductions thus exhibit that connected, sequential and cohesive three-move pattern (Establishing a territory, Creating a Niche and Occupying the Niche). For purposes of text analysis, identifying the 'staging' of an intent (as revealed in the linguistic choices a writer makes through a process called qualitative discourse analysis) reveals the 'moves' in the subject text. Yelland (2011) noted that there appears to be a structural significance to identifying 'moves' and distinguishing them from Steps. Indeed, it would seem that Moves derive their difference from Steps in that Steps are possible alternatives or options within a much wider function (the Moves) which flow naturally (by virtue of its rhetorical goal) to accomplish the social purpose of the text.

Hence, Swales' *Establishing a Territory* move has the following Steps or options as: claiming centrality and/or making a topic generalisation and/or reviewing items of previous research. This means that the steps can either co-occur or stand independently. Steps are distinct from each other in terms of micro functional meaning and how this is realised in language, yet have a similar wider or macro function (the move). However, the moves (and steps) here all follow a unified relationship in that they cohere to form part of a macro structure that realises a particular social purpose.

In other existing analysis of texts where specific steps/options are not identifiable within that wider function, the supposed steps become the 'moves' themselves. Moves may then give the impression of a 'floating' structural concept. But Yelland 's (2011, p. 222) contention that the 'identity of a move is ultimately defined by its place in the next highest-level of exchange (in a dialogic sense if one takes the case of a spoken text)' raises questions. Indeed, this idea seems to signal that moves become realised only in terms of

an exchange, which is obviously not the case with seemingly monologic written texts. Spoken or written, the identity of moves becomes dependent on the whole shifting of 'manoeuvres' or functional meaning of texts, the changes in intent, how such an intent contributes to an overall cohesive structure, and fulfils the rhetorical goal of the writer.

## **METHOD**

Fifty feedback commentaries were randomly chosen from module assessment comment sheets (MACS) written by five tutors in a part-time MA in Education programme in a pre-2002 teaching and learning institution in the UK. The MACS were written in response to first-submission assignments. The length of the MACS varied from half a page to one full-page, (approximately 150 to more than 500 words). Running words totalled 43, 694 for the full corpus. Before the categories were finalised, the process started with a 'spiral coding' process. This meant trialling the categories on a small sample set initially, extending the size of the corpus to fine-tune the categories, adopting an inter-rating procedure and finally applying the categories to a final set of feedback texts.

A qualitative discourse analysis was utilised as the investigation involved describing the messages found in the MACS through the use of specific categories. The analysis followed two phases. The first phase used an initial sample set of 30 randomly selected MACS. A provisional list of categories was drawn up to describe tutor messages, their characteristics identified, and similar moves set against each other to define their differences. Subsequently, two other raters were asked to rate the categories to identify the messages in written feedback. The results of the inter-rating procedure revealed a moderately high level of agreement among three raters' use of the categories ( $k = .75 > z.05$ , two-tailed test). The categories are the 'moves' referred to in this article.

For the second phase of the analysis, the size of the corpus was extended to 50 feedback sheets, and the fine-tuned categories were used to identify the contents/information found in MACS. In addition to frequency counts of the number of times a specific move occurred, characteristics for each move were noted, and the categories (or moves) were compared.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Tutor moves in written feedback for MA in Education students were found to orientate into positive judgments, negative judgments and neutral information (content-driven moves).

### *Positive judgment moves.*

The characteristics of positive judgment moves range from a focus on thought and process values, interpersonalness, and the supportive role of tutors. As positive judgments, the moves were used either as: evaluation where tutors highlight student action against a yardstick of criteria; and to highlight accomplishment with the seeming intent of boosting student self-esteem. In this sense, positive evaluation becomes a form of supportive intervention.

#### (1) *General Impression (GI Pos)*

A positive initial or overview comment reflecting the authority role of tutors to pass judgment. The comment may target both content and skill, functioning almost like a 'thesis statement' in an essay. An examination of the beginning move for each MACS revealed that tutors generally adopted positive GI (43 or 86%). Clearly, tutors recognised the value of delivering some good news first before any other type of message.

- *Your dissertation is very well written, with clarity and precision.*

#### (2) *Overall Judgment (OJ Pos)*

A positive summing-up comment usually found at the end feedback made after a discussion of specific points has been presented. No attempt is made to refer to any specific point or content of the student's work. This differs from GI in that it offers a judgment whereas a GI seemingly only offers an impression. OJ is usually found with a phrase that is equivalent to an overall assessment of the assignment (e.g. Well done!).

- *On the whole, a very promising and extremely interesting and useful piece of work. Well done!*

#### (3) *Highlighting Strengths (HS)*

A supportive comment which cites the effectiveness of the content or skills shown in the assignment. Because tutors emphasise the effective aspects of students' assignment, the implication is that tutors also set the criteria for what makes an assignment effective.

- *You contextualise the issue well in terms of the top down/bottom up argument about reading, and usefully point out the quantitative nature of the evidence so far.*

HS was heavily used by tutors (91 or 53%). HS functions for both evaluation of content, and for support or motivation. It ranked highest not only for all positive moves but also among all other moves (including negative and neutral).

#### (4) *Affective Judgment (AJ)*

A supportive comment about how an aspect of the student's assignment conforms to tutor preferences or expectations. Usually personalised, AJ affirms an idea or choice adopted by students. In contrast to HS, AJ is more appealing to the psycho-emotional state

of students, is signalled by words with strong affect quality (e.g. “I like,” “I enjoyed”, “I feel”). Sometimes it is combined with the tutor’s mentioning of the name of the student which adds a more interpersonal appeal.

- *I enjoyed reading your paper Kelly.*

(5) *Concurrence (Con)*

An informative and content-oriented judgment which conveys the tutor’s agreement to an idea or point cited by the student.

- *Of course, she’s right in her reasons for possible national decline then.*

Among the moves cited, HS and Con are both evaluations of content or the thought-value aspects of the assignment. HS is usually concentrated on how students effectively deal with criteria, so its focus is more on process than content. GI Pos, OJPos and AJ are not only indicative of the supportive role of tutors through motivation, but also work at building interpersonalness by focusing on building student self-esteem. Clearly, the use of these moves suggests that tutors have underlying intentions in conveying positive judgments or messages to students.

From the corpus analysed, there is a tendency for tutors to emphasise the use of positive judgment moves before negative judgment moves, often with positive judgments presented before the negative judgments. A survey of the 50 MACS comprising the corpus revealed that 50% followed the pattern whereby positive judgment moves were used as buffers before negative judgment moves. Yelland (2011) describes the use of ‘positive-negative comment’ structure as fairly commonsensical, and that it is mostly related to the concept of face, as well as a politeness strategy in creating an interpersonal function conducive to learning (Hyland and Hyland 2001). In an ESL context, Hyland and Hyland

(2001, p. 187-188) describes the use of praise and criticism as a kind of ‘sugaring the pill’ and brings in the notion of teacher response style and how their way of writing feedback may be ‘influenced by their belief systems’ and how teachers define their roles.

*Negative judgment moves*

In addition to expressing clear negative judgments, this category of moves includes veiled forms of ‘critical’ or ‘confronting’ judgments. Their functions include explicit identification of points missed out or leading students to think further about the lacking components of the assignment. Such moves do not only allow tutors to engage in a summative assessment of assignments; they also become ways by which tutors modify learning behaviour of students. Thus, the negative judgment moves can be considered as providing formative assessment in that these are meant to re-direct student learning behaviour into that which is standard, acceptable or required.

(1) *Identifying Weakness (IW)*

This is a confronting comment on weaknesses of an assignment. IW, however, refrains from making any suggestions on how to improve the weakness. As a judgment move, IW reflects the power and authority of tutors to pinpoint student failure to conform and can be seen as spelling out violations of what is considered ‘standard practice.’

- *You offer little justification or commentary on your methodology.*

(2) *Suggesting Improvement (SI)*

Generally signalled by modality, a prescriptive comment which recommends concrete steps on how weaknesses may be improved. SI does not contain explicit judgments, but indicates tutor expectations as regards solutions to specific weaknesses. As a move, it seems predicated on the idea that it is the tutor’s role to prescribe or

offer solutions to perceived limitations of the assignment. Three variants of SI were identified:

*Si-su* (provides concrete suggestions)

- *In my view, the elements of leadership and vision needed to be enunciated more fully in the first part of the paper.*

*Si-ju* (suggests an improvement through a juxtaposed comment where a negative comment is posed against a positive comment or vice-versa)

- *Some of your tables and figures could have been more effectively presented--though, for the most part, they are clear and appropriate.*

*SI-dir* (a suggestion in the form of a directive)

- *Use non gender-specific language in your paper.*

### (3) *Probing (PR)*

Usually stated as a closed or open-ended question to lead students to further explore an idea/option, to reflect, or to suggest or verify what has been missed out. Among the negative judgment moves, PR offers a catalysing effect in that it is the most indirect means of suggesting an improvement.

- *Why not put them into groups for this exercise?*

Yelland (2011, p. 225) did suggest that Suggesting Improvement, Juxtaposition, and Probing ...almost always realize managing a negative comment. This point becomes somewhat valid in that these moves tend to have that function, albeit in a very general sense. The examples show that there are finer differences as revealed in the language choices that tutors make, and such choices make the difference in terms of the more specific intent of tutors. This group of moves tended to orient students into the

standard, accepted way of doing things. The use of such moves may be taken as an example by which tutors (as adept practitioners) 'acculturate' students and engage the latter in a process of apprenticeship similar to that proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). For the most part, negative judgment moves are criteria-based in orientation and point to tutors as authority rather than as a source of motivation or affirmation. Yelland had earlier linked the use of negative comments to the question of 'face' (2011, p. 225), pointing out that the use of negative comments pose a serious face-threatening act. He noted that "making negative comment, then, without unacceptable damage to a student's 'face' is the single most important, and the most difficult, task that writing feedback involves" (2011, p. 225).

### *Content-driven Moves*

This group of moves seems to emphasise specific content found in students' assignments.

#### (1) *Recapitulation/Referencing (RR)*

Often personalised, RR involves describing the scope of the student's assignment but does not provide a judgment. RR may also refer to a point or issue raised by the student, but limits itself to just describing this point or issue. Though appearing descriptive, RR initially gives the impression of being neutral. However, when it occurs with critical or negative judgment moves, one wonders if RR is indeed a neutral move. It might be the case that in the absence of something good to say about an assignment, tutors can resort to describing what is accomplished by students in terms of scope rather than judging the quality of what is accomplished. In this sense, RR can be

seen as cushioning the impact of negative or critical judgments.

- *You have brought out various characteristics to set the scene for the discussion of the appropriateness of the TQM philosophy to education.*

RR was the most frequently used and indicates tutor preference for more descriptive information.

#### (2) Clarification (CLA)

An informative, reactive comment which offers a content input over an issue. In the following, the second sentence is categorised as a clarification on the first.

- *I also think you could have played up the significance of the customer. **The TQM position is that only customers define quality.***

#### (3) Justification (JUS)

A comment which offers a reason for a perceived weakness in the assignment. JUS is shown in the following example where the second sentence gives a reason for the perceived weakness cited in the first. If reasons are offered to justify what is missed out by students, it might be because tutors intend to shield the effect of critical or negative judgments. JUS then becomes a subtle way of making the student realise that while limitations are cited, tutors keep an open mind as to the cause/s behind such limitations. In this sense, the move may be seen as tutor provision of support to students.

- *Your original design, with control groups would have provided better evidence for or against the Hawthorne effect; **however, as you explained you were hard-pressed to fit pre testing,***

***practice and post-testing after a further 6 weeks.***

#### (4) Evidentiality (EV)

An informative comment which offers factual information to stress a point made by the tutor. EV points to tutors as a source of knowledge.

- *#1 Break time and the School: understanding and changing playground behaviour, P. Blatchford and S Sharp, Routledge, was reviewed by the TES on April 22nd!*

The last group of tutor moves shows that tutor messages in assignment feedback do not only consist of judgments and are not always evaluative in nature. In one sense, they can be descriptive (e.g. RR) or they can be ways for tutors to re-establish their position as the authority in the feedback process.

#### **Tutor moves and Heron's categories of counselling interventions**

In this section, I will anchor my findings in Heron's categories of interventions and argue that there is a counseling dimension to feedback that tutors adopt when they write comments for students' assignments.

In the area of practitioner-client relationships, inputs provided by tutors which reflect their intentions can be viewed as forms of intervention. I believe that Heron's categories of counseling intervention adequately capture the intentions of tutors in writing assignment feedback. Heron (1990, p. 3) defines an intervention as *an identifiable piece of verbal or non-verbal behaviour that is part of the practitioner's service to the client* and can be explained in three ways. For written feedback, the three ways are:

**Verbatim** (or the actual form of words) e.g. *I did find your style off putting in places*



**Linguistic** (the linguistic description of the actual form of words) e.g. the example is a declarative sentence

**Intentional** (what the practitioner, the tutor here, wants to achieve through the use of the linguistic form) e.g. in the example, to confront the student about a specific weakness in the assignment.

I understand Heron's notion of an intervention in terms of an intention, i.e. the tutor's underlying purpose in relation to what is manifest in the feedback. Intentions are defined from the viewpoint of the writer (in this case, the tutors) in relation to why a message is being conveyed to the reader (in this study, postgraduate students). I postulate that the moves identified have characteristics which define tutor intentions and can be related to the six-category interventions proposed by Heron. Randall and Thornton (2001, p. 77) noted '*Heron sees the system as being useful for a whole range of different professionals within the caring professions from school teachers providing counselling to students through lawyers with their clients or psychotherapists providing psychological support to clients.*'

Heron classified counsellor interventions broadly into authoritative and facilitative. My view is that prescriptive, informative and confronting interventions suggest that practitioner's role is more on the dominant side, often the one taking control. Control is achieved in the form of direction or guidance (prescriptive), expression of knowledge (informative) and challenge (confronting). In contrast, cathartic, catalytic and supporting interventions suggest that the practitioner's role is centred on the client's personhood, often aimed at the client's affective state. Thus, the practitioner helps the client deal with emotional blocks (cathartic), builds the

client's independent skills (catalytic), and motivates the client by focusing on her/his positive actions (supportive).

Among specific forms of intervention by Heron, (except 'cathartic' interventions) the rest can adequately describe the intentions inherent in the messages conveyed by tutors. As practitioners, tutors help the students achieve growth through the use of interventions in assignment feedback. However, because there is no face-to-face interaction involved in tutor feedback, the use of some interventions is more heightened compared to others.

The following table shows how specific moves adopted by tutors relate to Heron's categories of intervention vis-à-vis the possible intentions of tutors. From the table, the two broad categories to which specific moves can be assigned are Authoritative and Facilitative. In the authoritative category, I believe that tutors provide prescriptive, confronting and informative interventions. However, tutors can also describe what students accomplish in their assignments. Thus, I added the authoritative/descriptive and authoritative/evaluative sub-categories. In the facilitative group, tutors can be providing support, cathartic or catalytic interventions. Below I show how tutor moves and intentions in feedback can be mapped onto Heron's categories of counselling interventions.

Table 1. Tutor moves in written feedback and Heron's categories of interventions

<b>Moves</b>	<b>Tutor Intention</b>	<b>Heron's Categories of Counseling Intervention</b>
Suggesting Improvement (directive) SI-dir	Provide concrete guidelines for improving aspects of students' work	Authoritative/ Prescriptive
Suggesting Improvement (suggestion) SI-su		
Identifying Weakness IW	Raise the level of student awareness on limitations	Authoritative/ Confronting
Evidentiality EV	Impart knowledge, or viewpoint via factual statements or in reference to factual information	Authoritative/ Informative
Clarification CLA		
Justification JUS		
General Impression GI Pos	Highlight the positiveness of the students' choice as the tutor perceives it from his/her position as practitioner who has knowledge of criteria; affirm the client's actions as reflected in the assignment; focused on an evaluation of content	Facilitative/ supportive
Highlighting Strengths HS		
Overall Judgment Pos OJPos		
Affective Judgment AJ	Affirm the value of the client's person; directed at self-esteem	
Probing PR	Provide opportunities for growth in critical thinking; focused on more specific aspects of the students' assignment	Facilitative/ Catalytic
Recapitulation/Ref RR	Provide an account of what is included by the student to raise student consciousness about content; aimed at making student feel accomplished	Facilitative/ Descriptive

Tutors provide authoritative/prescriptive interventions when they recommend a suggestion or give a directive (e.g. Suggesting Improvement). The intention is to provide an intervention that will *direct the behaviour of the client* (Heron 1990, p. 5). Tutors provide an authoritative/informative intervention when their intention is to impart knowledge. Such an intention is evident when tutors stress a point by offering factual information as an authority, provide an authoritative reaction or a knowledgeable interpretation of a point raised by a student, and offer particular reasons based on their perception. Tutors provide authoritative/confronting interventions when they identify limitations in student behaviour (in this case in their assignment). The intention is to raise the level of student awareness of weaknesses in their assignments (realised when tutors identifying weaknesses in the assignment).

In the Facilitative group of interventions, the intent is to allow students to mature into more confident and independent learners. Such an intention is evident when tutors assume the role of facilitative catalysers of learning by providing students questions (i.e. PR move) to lead them to discovery of an idea. Tutors provide supportive interventions when they affirm the worth of students' persons, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. The nature of support is transparent, for instance, in AJ moves made by tutors. The intention to become supportive figures is not only directed to the emotions of students. The intention can also be directed to building a positive psyche among students evident in tutor use of positive beginning and ending moves (GI Pos and OJ Pos), and identifying the good points in students' assignments.

While most of the moves indicated here fit in with Heron's categories, there is a need to examine carefully the nature of GI, OJ, HS and RR on tutor intentions in assignment feedback. GI and OJ are not always with tutor intent to provide facilitative support. GI and

OJ can be confronting (i.e. raising the level of student awareness about the general limitations perceived in the assignment) in that general judgments can be confronting or 'critical' (i.e. as opposed to positive). Thus, GI and OJ moves become two-pronged as far as their relationship to Heron's categories of intervention is concerned. For GI, OJ and HS, one question is how does one verify whether a tutor is providing a positive evaluation of content/process as opposed to offering a supportive comment intended to affirm the person's worth (one mainly for motivational purposes). An example follows:

•GI: *This is an extremely well-crafted assignment.*

The judgment here appears to take on a neutral viewpoint in terms of social distance between the originator and the recipient of the message (given the lack of a clear subject as "I"). The message could have been expressed as *I find this an extremely well-crafted assignment.* Additionally, another determining characteristic of a facilitative intervention is the interpersonal and affective quality of words used. AJ is a concrete example of this.

•AJ: *I enjoyed reading your paper (Lesley).*

As AJ, the comment becomes a facilitative/supportive intervention. The use of "enjoyed" comes across as rather subjective and personal in that the tutor proceeds from a rather individual set of criteria (i.e. preferences) which are not judgments. The way Judgments is used here is in line with an objective set of criteria. The other important quality of a judgment or evaluation is its focus on content (again an objective quality) as opposed to preferences which are highly subjective or personal as in the use of the words "like" or "enjoy". "The following is an example:

- OJ: *On the whole, a very promising and extremely interesting and useful piece of work. Well done!*

While the positive judgment here qualifies as a supportive comment, it lacks the emotional slant characteristic of a supportive intervention. In addition to the absence of personalization achieved through the use of “I”, it lacks the emotive quality which characterizes a motivating move such as an AJ. The use of “promising” and “interesting” though seemingly subjective are countered by tutor use of “useful,” which pertains to a set of criteria that underlie judgments indicative of the emphasis on content.

HS is another move which appears supportive and can be argued as affirming the worth of students’ assignment. The basic question involved in HS is the truthfulness of the comment made in terms of content as opposed to a possible underlying intention to highlight a positive quality of the assignment for the purpose of affirming the student’s action. As shown in the following example, HS spells out specific strengths of the content of assignments and therefore cannot qualify as subjective preferences.

- HS: *It is well structured, written in a concise, unambiguous style, and is thoughtful in its analysis of \_\_\_\_\_.*

One can see that the evaluation here is directed at organization, clarity of writing, and thoroughness. In contrast, consider the following AJ move:

- AJ: *I like the use you make of sub-headings within the text.*

The use of personalization (i.e. “I” and “you”) which bridges that social distance between two communicators, establishes a certain sense of affect through the word “like.”

One move adopted by tutors which seems rather incompatible with any of Heron’s categories is RR, which indicates what the student has covered (in terms of scope) in the assignment. In deciding the category to which RR belongs, one can ask what is the likely intention behind the tutor’s mentioning of what the student was able to cover in the assignment. Two possibilities arise: to point out indirectly what the student has not actually covered in the assignment (which signals the role of the tutor as an authority evaluating the contents of the assignment); or to affirm the student’s decision regarding the chosen coverage and point out the significance of particular aspects or topics covered (which is facilitative/supportive in orientation). RR is a description of what the student has included in terms of a specific set of criteria, which the tutor as an authority weighs against what is found in the students’ assignment. RR is less of facilitative/supportive intent by the tutor. Rather, it is an authoritative/descriptive intervention.

In the following I provide an example of tutor-written feedback showing the moves, the intervention provided and the possible intent behind the move.

#### *Example of a Tutor Written Feedback*

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1. GIPos: *This is an extremely well- crafted assignment.*

Intervention: facilitative/supportive

Intention: to affirm/focus on content

2. HS1: *It is well structured, written in a concise, unambiguous style, and is thoughtful in its analysis of xxx.*

Intervention: facilitative/supportive

Intention: to affirm/focus on content

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3. HS2: *Even though you cover a wide range of issues, your clarity of style means that the depth of analysis is not compromised by the breadth.*

Intervention: facilitative/supportive

Intention: to affirm/focus on content

4. HS3: *The coherence of your structure also enables you to move from debate on the elements of ---- through ---- and into the ---- role of the----, which is, of course, at the core of your assignment.*

Intervention: facilitative/supportive

Intention: to affirm/focus on content

5. HS4: *This is achieved in a generally seamless way.*

Intervention: facilitative/supportive

Intention: to affirm/focus on content

6. IW: *I think you miss a trick early on, however, where you acknowledge the current emphasis on X, but do not suggest reasons for this emphasis.*

Intervention: authoritative/confronting

Intention: to raise awareness

7. SI-su: *This could have been a core theme*

Intervention: authoritative/prescriptive

Intention: to direct

8. IW: *Also, although your range and quality of references/quotes are undoubted strengths of your assignment, their quantity does rather squeeze practical insights to a minimum, thus constraining their potential impact.*

Intervention: authoritative/confronting

Intention: to raise awareness

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As shown, the initial intent of the tutor was to affirm the student's work, evident initially in the use of GI Pos followed by a series of HS. This pattern indicates a tutor who is a supportive facilitator affirming the value of the content of the student's assignment and inevitably the student's person. The attempt to be supportive is balanced out by critical comments (use of IW-SI-IW pattern) which projected the tutor as a confronting authority with the intention of raising the level of student awareness to limitations noted.

A statistical analysis of the difference in tutor use of Authoritative and Facilitative moves revealed that there is a clear distinction in their tutor use of specific moves which belong to these two groups. The difference was found significant at 5% level ( $t=3.53$ ,

$df=4$ ,  $p=.024$ ). This means that tutors were either conscious about fulfilling a role to support/motivate or to guide based on the specific messages they conveyed. Further, the results suggest that tutors either emphasised one role over another, which means that these were conscious choices on their part. In a statistical analysis of the moves that tutors from the research setting adopted, it is the role of a facilitator that tutors emphasised rather than that of an authority ( $\chi^2=16.8$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $P<0.01$ ).

## CONCLUSION

This article claims that tutor comments to student assignments may be explained by their perception of their roles in feedback provision. Analysing feedback commentaries through the notion of roles that tutors project

onto their language suggests the value they place on students, and lending credence to a possible model of feedback that is 'student-centred.'

This article theorises that one important frame that tutors may be proceeding from is their perception of their roles as practitioners helping their clients. The provision of interventions evident in their use of specific moves strongly points to a counselling focus in the language of feedback-- one that perhaps may be specific to the area of educational studies. Yelland suggests that another way of modelling moves is through a 'close enquiry into tutor's perceptions and intentions in writing particular bits of feedback' (2011, p. 222). There is no doubt to the value of such an investigation.

The possibility of using lexicogrammatical features of specific moves also point to the possibility of tagging feedback texts for larger corpora analysis to determine tutor dominant style of writing. This is an exciting piece of research that will shed further light on understanding the language of feedback. Other avenues that may be explored in future research involves getting specific bits of feedback written by tutors, exploring how they are linguistically realised, and subsequently asking students' interpretation.

### Notes

\*As the discussion here builds on the initial study (Mirador 2000), a couple of the examples derive from the same work.

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