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## ***An interview with Professor Dana Ferris***

*In this interview with Christine Calfoglou, one of the special issue editors, Professor Dana Ferris discusses the various facets of written feedback, its role in writing instruction, current feedback-related research she engages in and future prospects.*

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*Στη συνέντευξη που ακολουθεί, η Καθηγήτρια Dana Ferris αναφέρεται σε διάφορες πτυχές της γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης, στο ρόλο της στη διδασκαλία της παραγωγής γραπτού λόγου, στο τρέχον ερευνητικό της έργο και στις μελλοντικές προοπτικές.*

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**Christine Calfoglou (C.C.).** Professor Ferris, it is a great pleasure to be ‘talking’ to you! I would appreciate your views as a writing and feedback expert on the following issues: You have dealt with feedback issues extensively. What special attraction do they hold for you?

**Dana Ferris (D.F.).** Feedback is very integral to teaching writing. It represents individualized instruction and an instructor’s commitment to the students. Because of its potential and because so much teacher time is spent on it, I feel it’s important to conduct research on how feedback works and to help equip teachers to do this substantial work better.

**C.C.** ‘Feedback’ as a notion carries the flavor of behaviourist concepts like stimulus and response. Do you think that current feedback-related research has disentangled itself from this association? Does it need to do so?

**D.F.** I don’t really agree with that characterization. Again, I see it as a form of individualized instruction to student writers, not some disembodied/generic stimulus/response.

**C.C.** At some point in an interview you pointed out that feedback might be the most important aspect of writing instruction. Could you please elaborate?

**D.F.** The most important part of writing instruction is for students to write and to learn about writing and themselves as writers by so doing. Feedback is an integral part of that goal because it provides students with reactions from readers about what works and what does not.

**C.C.** You have conducted systematic research on written corrective feedback. Where do you feel we are at the moment? How far have we got?

**D.F.** I think we've gotten amazingly far in the last 20 years. It's remarkable, really. In my own thinking and writing I've gone from "Well, maybe it works; we don't know" to "Yes, it definitely helps, if done properly." Future work on this topic needs to focus on the "how best" rather than the "if."

**C.C.** Where do you see the dividing line between correction and feedback? Is this a still valid distinction?

**D.F.** The terms are used interchangeably in the literature, but I'd probably distinguish them by saying that "correction" involves providing "right answers" to students and "feedback" involves giving them information that helps them learn about writing, language, and editing processes.

**C.C.** A number of feedback taxonomies have emerged in the literature: Direct/indirect, selective/comprehensive, collective/individual(ised), immediate/ delayed, form-/content-focussed, pre-text/text-based, process/product, among others. Would you see this as labyrinthine? How have we benefited from it? Do you feel there is any one particular taxonomy that has held sway lately?

**D.F.** It may be "labyrinthine," but I think it's necessary to consider all of these issues, both as teachers and as researchers. I'd say the one most people think/argue about is the "selective/comprehensive" dichotomy.

**C.C.** Do you believe there are untreatable errors?

**D.F.** I defined "untreatable" as language features that don't have specific rules that can be taught and learned. I'd consider lexical errors to be untreatable as well as some sentence structure errors (e.g., word order, collocations).

**C.C.** Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback has been defined (I am paraphrasing) as a quick focused response to short chunks of text. What lies ahead for this kind of error treatment?

**D.F.** The term was invented by Prof. Norm Evans at Brigham Young University (see, for example, Hartshorn *et al.*, 2010, in *TESOL Quarterly*). The program I direct uses this approach in all classes. One of the Ph.D. students teaching in our program did a large study of its efficacy and student responses to it, and it will be published soon in *TESOL Quarterly*. We find it a very effective way to give students individualized attention on language issues and raise student awareness of patterns of error. We're actually looking to expand its use beyond grammar errors to include vocabulary and to help promote metacognition through reflective writing.

**C.C.** What is your advice with regard to the treatment of content- as against form-related problems in a written text?

**D.F.** My advice is the same as it's always been: be encouraging, be clear, be selective (don't try to address everything in one feedback round), be constructive (give them advice for revision). My advice is the same whether it's written teacher feedback or 1:1 writing conferences (teacher and student).

**C.C.** Process writing bloomed in the 80's but it appears to me that, whatever its flaws, it might be the only fully-fledged writing instruction theory so far. What do you see silhouetted against the writing instruction theory horizon at the moment? And, how are changes in writing instruction theory affecting feedback theory?

**D.F.** In my opinion, the best "writing instruction theory" is a hybrid of process, genre pedagogy, rhetorical awareness (especially consideration of audience), and metacognition. All of those pieces should be part of any approach to teaching writing.

**C.C.** Would you support peer feedback in the adult community?

**D.F.** I'm a huge believer in peer feedback and think it's appropriate for any writing class (or class that includes writing assignments) (see, for example, Ferris, 2007 in *Journal of Second Language Writing*).

**C.C.** Would you think there are power relationships at work in the feedback providing process? Are they inevitable or could they be mitigated somehow?

**D.F.** Absolutely there are power relationships, and yes, they are inevitable. Of course, teachers should treat student writers with respect and give them ideas to consider rather than commands, but let's not kid ourselves: the teacher is still the power figure in that dynamic.

**C.C.** How would you describe the role of the teacher and feedback provider? Would you be happy with the term 'informed reader'? Why/why not? Is feedback a dialogic experience?

**D.F.** I see the teacher as the expert and the guide. Teachers shouldn't be afraid to share their expertise -- that's why they're the teacher. Feedback can be a dialogic experience, but it isn't always or even often. The teacher typically has to build in a dialogic step in the feedback cycle (e.g., students coming in for a conference or writing a response to the feedback they received)—or it's not likely to happen naturally. Students tend to simply accept the teacher's authority, and teachers expect to have that authority, too.

**C.C.** Is there any specific written feedback format you would recommend? For example, mitigators have been found to be soothing while at the same time potentially confusing. My research suggests that questions are generally valued among adult distance learners, often because they are more tentative than statements. What do you think?

**D.F.** I think questions are fine as long as they're not too abstract. Being clear and constructive --giving students feedback they can understand and apply -- is more important than the form of the feedback.

**C.C.** You have spoken in favour of focused feedback. My experience as an open and distance learning educator, however, has shown that written feedback on distance learners' written assignments may need to be exhaustive, as this is one of their few chances over the year to hear their teacher's 'voice' and get some guidance, which they are desperately in need of. On the other hand, I do realize that exhaustive feedback may sometimes be overwhelming. What is your opinion? Would this be an individualized feedback issue, in the sense of calibrating one's students needs and personality and deciding how focused or exhaustive one might be in each individual case?

**D.F.** By “exhaustive,” I assume you mean “comprehensive.” I think the issue is neither opportunity nor teacher exhaustion -- it’s how much feedback students can cope with and learn from. If you mark 95 different errors from 17 different categories in a four-page paper, I question how much students will understand and learn from that feedback, let alone what they’ll remember and transfer. Marking error according to repeated patterns -- and a limited number of patterns each time -- has more potential to actually help students.

**C.C.** Based on your experience, is there any further intuition you might have with regard to distance learning feedback? For example, would you support video-conferencing as a feedback provision channel?

**D.F.** Absolutely, video-conferencing is a great tool. Many writing teachers do this already, and not even in fully online environments. Even in traditional face-to-face instructional context, video conferencing provides schedule flexibility for teachers and students. Some of the newer apps and learning management system tools also allow embedded audio feedback. I think teachers should be open-minded about using technology for feedback in any way that works for both teacher and students.

**C.C.** What would you see as the main avenue opening up in feedback research at the moment?

**D.F.** - Technology and how it influences and changes the feedback process (from both teacher and student perspectives)

- How teachers learn to give good feedback (and get better at it)

- Feedback in the disciplines, not writing courses

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## References

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Dana Ferris spent 18 years as Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento and is now Professor and Director of the University of California Davis Writing Program. Her research has focused generally on teaching second language readers and writers and specifically on response to student writing and written corrective feedback in second language writing. Her work has been published in a range of journals including *TESOL Quarterly*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Her latest book is *Teaching English to Second Language Learners* (2018, Routledge, with Jonathan Newton, Christine Goh, William Grabe, Fredricka Stoller, and Larry Vandergrift). She is currently Co-Editor of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* and founding Editor of the *Journal of Response to Writing*.

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