

Online learner reticence in response to faculty corrective feedback on APA style

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a 2021 exploratory investigation concerning factors that influence online learner reticence toward the application of corrective feedback relating to the writing style sanctioned by the American Psychological Association. The research question for the qualitative case study explored reasons for a disinclination in the acceptance of corrective instructor feedback and redirection of the proper application of APA style by a panel of graduate students. The results of this investigation captured personal views relating to the adoption of rules of APA style, and reasons for non-compliance including some aspect of interruption with the receipt of instructor feedback, limited prior experience with APA style, and inconsistencies regarding the expressed need for adherence to APA style between instructors. The discussion offers considerations for faculty, staff, and administration as they deliberate an approach to upholding the writing style sanctioned by the American Psychological Association while promoting an improved response to learner uptake of corrective feedback.

Keywords: instructor feedback, APA style, learner reticence

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INTRODUCTION

Regarded as an essential element in any learning model, instructional feedback has been widely examined as a complex encounter between the teacher and student. According to Graham “feedback is essential to good writing. This becomes especially obvious when feedback is not successful” (2018, p. 145). Faculty regularly provide corrective feedback (CF) for assignments authored by students, highlighting errors in grammar and style with the hope that the guidance will help learners understand their mistakes and strive to correct them in subsequent work. But when the same errors appear in later assignments, faculty might question why the oversights continue despite the earnest effort to point out discrepancies. Beyond questions of proficiency, learner inaction in response to instructor feedback might easily be misconstrued as being a question of learner motivation. But there is a range of potential reasons for learner reticence that suggest that it might not be solely a result of learner ability or enthusiasm.

Broadly defined, *reticence* is a lack of willingness or desire to do or accept something; a disinclination, unwillingness, or reluctance (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A review of the literature reveals an array of investigations that focus on reticence as it applies to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) discipline, commonly revealed as non-participation by learners in classroom speaking activities following instruction. Yet beyond the varied implications that learner reluctance might have in the EFL classroom, averseness toward the acceptance of feedback from an instructor is worthy of examination.

This paper presents the results of a recent exploratory investigation concerning factors that influence online learner reticence toward the application of corrective feedback relative to the writing style sanctioned by the American Psychological Association. The research question for the qualitative study explored reasons for a disinclination toward acceptance of corrective instructor feedback in the correct use of APA style in written assignments by a panel of graduate students. In particular, what effects were revealed for why instructor feedback did not result in the desired change in learner behavior.

Investigative Context and Theoretical Framework

The question of how learners respond to corrective feedback provided by their instructor can be connected to the work of Lev Vygotsky and his sociocultural theory of learning. Through this theory, Vygotsky (1978) described how children learn through social interaction between participants which ultimately determines how a learner will internalize new behaviors. The metaphor Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains the human learning experience as an individualized behavior wherein learners assign relevance and significance to events, including whether to accept or reject feedback as well as the extent to which it is to be retained. Vygotsky explained ZPD to be “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86).

The theoretical premise of the investigation reported in this paper is reflective of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, particularly in relation to a learner’s decision to accept or reject feedback adoption of corrective feedback offered by their instructor. Vygotsky theorized that the ZPD is the difference between what a pupil can achieve when acting alone as compared to what the same person can accomplish when acting with another person’s support

(Landolf, 2000). Vygotsky encouraged teachers to provide guidance and assistance to engage students in activities that are beyond their individual levels of competence (Cazden 1992).

Research Question

The problem that was considered though this study examined why some online graduate students demonstrate a disinclination to apply corrective instructor feedback relative to the use of APA style in written assignments. The focal question to be addressed through this investigation was:

Q1: What are the common reasons stated by online graduate students for not accepting corrective feedback received from instructors regarding errors in the application of APA style in writing assignments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zone of Proximal Development

Lev Vygotsky (1962) constructed his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in response to a negative experience that he had with psychometric-based testing during his time working with the Soviet education system. His experience with testing focused heavily on the present level of achievement as compared to one's potential for future development. According to Vygotsky, when students are assisted in their learning experience, ZPD elevates the "tomorrow of development" (1978).

Vygotsky's work with ZPD focused on how cognitive development is influenced through social interaction, including how adult guidance and peer collaboration can positively impact what children would otherwise attain through independent learning experiences. Vygotsky's original definition of ZPD has been revised to be applied to the adult learner. The contemporary definition proposes that the ZPD is the level of potential development formed through collaboration with a teacher or peer (Ohta, 2005, Warford, 2011).

But Vygotsky's ideas on the criticality of feedback were not always consistent with the epitomical beliefs of other learning theorists of the time, including Jean Piaget. Piaget proposed that learning is very much an individual endeavor and that learning can only be facilitated by way of a stimulating learning environment to provide opportunities for pupils to share and discuss their egocentric thinking with others, creating disequilibrium in thinking. Piaget cautioned that teachers should not interfere with individual thinking because of the inherent risk that doing so will result in an imposition of the teacher's ideas onto the student. Piaget referred to this likelihood as sociocentrism (Cazden 1992).

Response to Instructor Corrective Feedback

Learner "uptake" commonly refers to the possible response by students following instructor corrective feedback (Sheen, 2004). Soo & Goh (2013) surmised that a "lack of relevant knowledge about reticence has caused many instructors to wrongly perceive their students' ability... [and to assume] that they do not have the desire to learn" (p. 67).

In their 2010 study, Storch & Wigglesworth examined the nature of how students accept instructor feedback received in their writing assignments and why some feedback is accepted

(and subsequently incorporated) and some is not. The findings of their study suggest that a learner's acceptance of feedback is influenced by a host of linguistic and affective reasons, most significantly stemming resulting from learner attitudes, beliefs, and goals.

As presented in their literature review, Storch & Wigglesworth report that while some of the studies they reviewed found that targeted CF can be effective, other investigations by Hyland & Hyland (2006) and Goldstein (2005) resolved that the efficacy of instructor feedback is mixed and inconclusive. They also cite Swain's (2006) and Swain and Lapkin's (2003) work that found that second language writers might reject corrective feedback if it is at all contrary to their own thoughts regarding the proper use of language. Their findings serve to validate the need for a continued examination of how learners process feedback in response to a sociocultural experience such as ZDP, which is consistent with the theoretical premise surrounding the investigation reported in this paper.

The degree that institutional and programmatic culture reinforces the importance of corrective feedback has been reinforced in other studies reported in the literature. An investigation by Ivanič, Clark & Rimmershaw (2000) concluded that instructional feedback portrays departmental conventions and reinforces institutional orthodoxies, which affects learner perceptions.

An investigation of assessment practices in higher education by Maclellan (2001) considered student and faculty perceptions of instructional feedback found differences in the response between the two groups. The investigator concluded that while faculty expressed their commitment to formative assessment practices, they instead subscribed to practices that only served to militate the effort. The findings of the study suggest that feedback can influence learning when pupils accept the feedback as being helpful, and not simply a judgment of their performance.

Learner Error in APA Style

Van Note Chism & Weerakoon (2012) explored factors commonly associated with errors that new graduate students make when formatting APA style citation including:

- cognitive confusion
- poor mental imaging
- motivation
- personal style
- simple lack of practice
- some combination thereof (p. 29)

Given the findings of their investigation, Van Note Chism & Weerakoon (2012) offer three broad implications for practitioners in the field, including that faculty should not assume that "prior experience or self-discovery are adequate methods for students to learn tasks that seem routine" (p. 36). They also encouraged program faculty to share the value of APA style use and reinforce its criticality in learning. Finally, they offer the importance of scholarship of teaching and learning in unraveling the causes behind student writing errors and improving instruction (p. 37).

Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao (2006) were forerunners in the study of relationships between errors on APA style and author characteristics. Findings from their examination include:

- learner perfectionism is correlated with adherence in the citation style

- a correlation between library anxiety and adherence to APA style citation
- a decline in adherence the longer graduate students were enrolled, possibly due to inconsistent corrections offered by different instructors

A review of the literature suggests a continued investigation of the problem of why some learners do not respond to corrective feedback, specifically in their application of APA style, would be appropriate as questions of significance and strategies to mitigate them remain.

METHODS

Participants and Sampling

For this investigation, a sample of graduate learners was recruited from the participating institution of higher learning located in the Midwest region of the United States. The writing guidelines sanctioned by the American Psychological Association (7th edition) are the required writing style for all graduate courses in the behavioral science disciplines at the participating institution. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the participating higher learning institution, an announcement describing the investigation was emailed to all graduate faculty asking that they share details about the study with students they identified as not responding to corrective feedback regarding errors in APA style. Enrollment of participants was closed when the intended sample of ten consenting adult graduate students had been qualified.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview of each of the 10 individual participants was conducted by the investigator throughout December 2021. An iterative approach to data collection, reflective of the constructivist grounded theory methodology, was followed. Participants were asked open-ended questions relative to their perceptions of APA style, how their recent experiences with instructor feedback on the application of APA style in their written assignments had affected their learning, and why there was no resulting uptake in the corrective feedback provided by their instructor in recent assignments where adherence to APA style was called for.

The interview sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. To safeguard the confidentiality and data security all responses were anonymized and managed solely by the investigator. A three-person committee seated by the investigative completed a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts. As themes emerged from the data, they were sorted to provide a contextualized representation of the data. Select quotes representative of the categories is shared with the results in this paper.

RESULTS

A panel of qualified graduate students offered their personal views and perceptions regarding their uptake of instructor corrective feedback specific to the proper use of APA style in writing assignments related to their online studies. All ten of the qualified subjects participated in the study.

The demographic profile of the student participants included five females and five males. The age range was 23 through 42, with a mean age of 30. All were actively enrolled in a graduate degree program in the field of education. The self-reported cumulative GPA of the

participants was 3.20 with a mean online course completion of seven courses. Three of the participants reported that APA style was emphasized during their enrollment in their baccalaureate program, two claimed they had previous training on the use of APA style with one noting that it was a required element in past program enrollment. While the application of APA 7th edition style is a recognized expectation of writing assignments in the programs that participants were enrolled is acknowledged, successful completion of formal training on the use of APA style was not a prerequisite. All subjects reported that APA supportive resources were provided by the university, however, and that the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020) was included in the required booklist.

The data resulting from the interviews highlighted learner views on their seeming reluctance toward responding to corrective instructor feedback about their application of APA style in written assignments. Similar to the results of the 2010 Storch & Wigglesworth study, the transcripts revealed a range of sentiments on the experience in learning APA style as well as reasons why participants did not respond to instructor corrective feedback. The following are direct quotes offered by panelists regarding their general perceptions of APA style:

“APA is a nightmare. It keeps me up at night worrying if I got it right”

“Some teachers don’t know APA style themselves”

“I guess it is important – wish that I only had the time to learn it”

“How many ways does there need to be to format a damn citation?”

“APA should stand for ‘A Pain in the Ass’”

“I’m far too busy to worry about learning APA style”

Panelists were asked about how their recent experience with instructor feedback on APA style affected their learning. Four of the panelists reported some type of disconnect with the receipt of instructor feedback, with three indicating they were not aware that feedback had been provided and one admitting to an unintentional document setting that concealed the comments that had been inserted into previous assignments. Two offered that while errors with APA style were noted by their instructors, the oversights were not explained.

“What feedback? Most of the time all I get back is a grade in response to the assignments that we submit”

“For a long time, I didn’t know that feedback was even provided Because the comment markup in Word was not properly set which impacted my grade.”

“In the past, I got papers back with notes that there were mistakes with APA but without clarification on what they were. When I asked, I got no response and so I figured it wasn’t too big of a deal.”

“If it were that important, the teacher should have told me exactly what was wrong and sent it back to me so I can fix the errors”

“I knew that I was losing points, but I just gave up.”

Participants were queried on their reasons for not responding to the corrective feedback. Two explained that they had limited prior experience with APA style and, consequently, were ill-prepared to adopt the prescribed writing style.

“I never received any preparation on APA style in my past school work”

“English is my second language.”

Still, others questioned the significance of demonstrating skill with APA style or the return on investment for time spent learning the style when compared to the actual impact on their grades.

“Why do we even need to learn this stuff?”

“The point value was not significant enough to prompt corrective response. I can blow off APA and still get an A”

Six of the ten students participating in the study noted inconsistencies in how different faculty uphold the program expectation for adherence to APA style.

“There is a huge gap between how instructors expect attention to APA style from their students. Some don’t seem to care, while others are like ‘APA zealots.’”

“My online courses routinely contain errors in APA style.”

“Until I get my assignment back, it’s tough to know what every teacher really wants from me”

“In one class, the instructor tells us to do it one way, and then that changes in the next class with a different instructor.” For example, do we use the Student version or the Professional version?

Collectively, the responses of the panel included a generally adverse perception toward adopting the writing style. While some participants expressed an appreciation for rules when it comes to effective writing, others felt that there are too many rules connected to the APA guidelines. A majority of the views extended did not contest the need for a uniform approach to writing as much as they questioned the criticality of mastering the skill in a graduate-level program of study, especially if they had no inclination to continue with their studies beyond the current degree and no intent to publish. Seven of the ten panelists noted inconsistencies in the expectations between faculty members, including five that questioned whether all faculty have mastered the style themselves.

Limitations

Certain limitations surrounding this investigation are acknowledged by the investigator including recognized confines that might have impacted the results of the study. For example, the sole institution selected for the case study, the sample size, participant selection, and the semi-structured nature of the interviews certainly influenced the reliability of this scholastic endeavor. Accordingly, the results of the study are not considered by the investigator to be generalizable beyond the population seated for the study. Instead, the results should be viewed as a catalyst for consideration by academic professionals as they consider the work they do with their own students, for the outcomes associated with the programs and constituents they serve, and the professional field they represent.

DISCUSSION

This study involved an examination of the individual views and perceptions of online graduate students in relation to their experience in the adoption of faculty feedback received in response to the application of APA style in written assignments. The responses collected from the panel offer insight into the reasons surrounding their choices for not responding to faculty redirection. The result may be of benefit to those concerned with a lack of uptake of instructor feedback, particularly with the use of APA style and interests in efforts to address the problem.

Beginning with perceptions toward APA as a writing style, most of the panelists acknowledged a need for academic writing guidelines in their program of study, but the level of effort to master the range of rules relative to the writing style seemed to be a key apprehension (especially to those without the previous orientation to the style or whose writing abilities are not

consistent with the demands of graduate-level studies). This was found to be consistent with the results of the Waytowich, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao (2006) investigation reported in the literature review presented earlier in this paper.

Reflective of the findings, higher learning programs striving for improvement in the application of student APA style writing skills should ensure that a systemic effort to justify the expectation is present. Practices to acknowledge and uphold the expectation surrounding the policy for the use of APA (or any other writing style) style might help to alleviate questions surrounding relevancy toward use. Consistent with the findings of Ivanič, Clark & Rimmershaw (2000), making the rationale for accepted standards widely known is important for a learning community to uphold its cultural interests, and so reiterating the reason for the programs' adoption of the APA writing style should be routinely stated and explained across all ranks of the program.

Institutions would be remiss to not address applicant skill sets that are not consistent with the grade-level expectations in the early stages of enrollment, preferably in conjunction with pre-admission activities. It comes with little surprise that students that are prepared for the learning experience will perform better than those that do not, as overcoming a void in writing skills can be a daunting challenge when addressed in unison with the demands of achieving other program outcomes. As offered in the work of Van Note Chism & Weerakoon (2012), learners that question the value of learning a particular writing style may have a history of difficulty with writing tasks in general, and it is imperative to know the current skill level of students so that the most appropriate remedies can be considered. Accordingly, a learner support initiative would reasonably begin with an assessment of the writing skill of all students at the time of initial program enrollment.

While the array of ancillary services offered by institutions of higher learning has historically included writing skill support, a common view expressed by support staff is that those that might benefit most from available services are the ones that do not always take advantage of them. In response, an avenue for a direct faculty referral of learners that would benefit from support services as determined through skill assessment or reticence in the uptake of learner feedback would be most appropriate.

Sustaining a learning culture that embraces the APA sanctioned style also suggests that faculty will be knowledgeable of the writing approach themselves, and possess a corresponding ability to identify and address errors and oversights in the application of the rules in conjunction with their assessment of writing assignments. Given the remarks made by panelists regarding their impressions of faculty command of APA style, it might also be reasonable to appraise faculty to ensure their knowledge of the writing style and ability to confidently redirect learners when errors are noted. But faculty and staff that are not proficient in APA style would lessen any initiative to wholly sustain a continuity of the expectation through instruction. The same would be true for those that work with course content, and their effort to ensure that publicly facing course content consistently adheres to APA style. Such content includes course documents (such as syllabi) and the information contained in online courses.

Once proficiency of faculty and staff with APA style is certain, an administrative mechanism to measure faculty adherence to the consistent application of APA style in graded work would serve to uphold the interest of the initiative. As suggested by panelists in this study, inconsistent responses toward how the use of APA style is enforced between faculty members can be a source of frustration, not only for learners but for those faculty trying to uphold the

policy. In this case, the proverb that claims that ‘a chain is only as strong as its weakest link,’ carries a literal meaning.

These are some of the possible considerations to be made, based on the responses gleaned from the panel seated for this investigation. However, it is also recognized that the manner in which any of these strategies might realistically unfold would very much depend on the institution and the degree of instructional autonomy is extended. In the end, however, perhaps the most effective instructional responses to individual learner reticence in the uptake of corrective feedback will be found through direct conversation with the student.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the results of an exploratory investigation focused on factors that influence online learner reticence in response to corrective feedback regarding errors in a prescribed writing style. The research question for the qualitative study explored reasons why some students did not institute corrective instructor feedback to address oversights in APA style in subsequent writing assignments. The findings of this investigation extend the literature by offering specific reasons for why some learners do not heed the guidance offered by their instructors, including their own personal views relating to the stringent rules of APA style, some manner of disconnect with the receipt of instructor feedback, limited prior experience with APA style, and inconsistencies regarding the need for APA style between instructors. The discussion offers considerations for faculty, staff, and administration as they deliberate a viable approach to upholding the writing style sanctioned by the American Psychological Association while promoting an improved response to learner uptake of corrective feedback.

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