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A guide to responding to  
course participants' written work

# Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision

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# FOREWORD

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These supplementary notes are intended to assist assessors and/or facilitators with responding to participants' submitted work in the Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision course. The course is intended to prepare novice supervisors for the complex pedagogy of postgraduate supervision. Given that developing student writing is a central concern for supervisors, it is a key focus of the course. It is therefore important that assessors on the course model the provision of developmental comments when they give formative feedback on course participants' reflective essays. This document is intended to support that process.

While this document is thus intended for assessors on the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course, it may well be of use to a wider readership and, as with all materials used in the course, it is registered under a Creative Commons license making it freely available and adaptable by anyone for educational purposes.

Please visit the course website for more information:

***[www.postgraduatesupervision.com](http://www.postgraduatesupervision.com)***

We hope that these notes prove useful to the wonderful team of facilitators, assessors and moderators who make this course possible and we thank Carol for developing them.

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# INTRODUCTION

Providing feedback on participants' assignments is, in some ways, already addressed within the course itself, which includes materials about how best to develop students' mastery of academic texts. There are of course, three PowerPoint presentations on the course sites, for both participants and facilitators, which provide a wealth of information, insight and guidance on areas such as the nature of academic writing; the writing process; strategies for developing independent, critical engagement with texts; giving feedback and so on. These notes do their best, therefore, not to repeat any of that but rather try to deepen the conversation around the roles of assessor and 'writing respondent'.

They begin, therefore, by offering a brief rationale for why 'giving feedback' or perhaps more accurately, 'feeding forwarding', should be taken so seriously on this course, but also in every higher education teaching and learning context. So the role of feedback in the learning and assessment process, and the implications of the relational nature of 'being a respondent' are considered first.

Thereafter, a scholarly conversation around plagiarism is begun with the aim of expanding the most common understanding of the concept being that of 'stealing'. An extract from a 'letter' (Dear Lex) written to a masters student on a post-graduate research programme at one of our universities from one of the assessor/ respondents who also teaches on the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course is included here. The purpose is to illustrate possible ways of addressing the issue of plagiarism, either in your own teaching and learning contexts, or should you experience it in the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course. It is assumed that everyone will adapt ideas from this extract to their own situations.

In the final section of this supplement, exemplars of authentic responses to writing of participants on the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* programme already concluded in other HEIs are presented. In addition, as posing questions to writers/participants is one of the most effective ways in which to provoke deeper thought and stimulate learning, a variety of different types of questions, serving different purposes, are offered to you as a possible resource when you start responding to written submissions.

The supplement ends with an invitation to you, as an assessor/ facilitator, to critique them i.e. to give the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course co-ordinators 'feedback' on whether or not this supplement has been useful to you, what might have been done differently, and what recommendations you have for the next edition. You are more than welcome to challenge and contest the substance of comments given in the exemplars too, and indicate your own position on the various issues selected for focus here. Your comments will then be 'fed forward' into planning and compiling the next edition. We would also like you to offer your own exemplars of feedback for consideration for inclusion in this next revised version<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though all extracts from participants' assignments are anonymised here, they have been used with permission from the authors. If you provide us with extracts to add to subsequent versions of this document, please obtain express permission from the authors to do so.

## Assessment *for* learning: the role of ‘feedback’

Hounsell identifies three ways in which ‘well-crafted feedback’ can stimulate and sustain learning. They are:

- *by accelerating learning*, i.e. speeding up what can be learned by the students<sup>2</sup> concerned within a given period of time, and so enabling learning to take place more rapidly, or in greater depth or scope, than would otherwise be the case;
- *by optimising the quality of what is learned*, i.e. helping to ensure that the learning outcomes achieved and evinced by the students meet the standards hoped for or required (e.g. in terms of precision, appreciation of complexity, applicability to real-world problems and so on);
- *by raising individual and collective attainment*, through enabling the students to attain standards of levels of achievement higher than those which they might otherwise have reached i.e. without recourse to the scaffolding afforded by feedback.

Hounsell (2007:101)

Hounsell’s thoughts are insightful and worthy of deeper consideration. They are useful too, in leading a discussion into ‘what’ can be addressed through written responses to participants’ work, and the ‘how’ of approaches to do this most effectively. Perhaps the first general observation to be made is that, underlying each of the above ‘ways’ is *an energy, a positive intention to move participants onwards and upwards towards a place that lies beyond their present position* - hence the notion of ‘feedback’ simultaneously serving the critical function of ‘feeding forward’. In many respects, therefore, if the above three points about ‘sustained’ learning hold true, a writing respondent takes on the role very much like that of Vygotsky’s<sup>3</sup> ‘More Knowledgeable Other’ (MKO). In Vygotsky’s theory of social learning, this is someone who provides the necessary and sufficient scaffolding to allow an individual to move beyond their present level of competence and into a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through the comments you provide to participants in their written submissions, you play the role of the ‘more knowledgeable other’. Ideally, participants actively engage with the feedback you give them and integrate it with their existing understanding of the various areas you target. If they do this successfully they will move forward independently and so steadily develop more and more.

### ‘Feeding back’/‘Feeding forward’: A dialogical relationship

What is clear from the above perspective on responding to participants’ writing is the *relational* nature inherent to ‘giving and receiving’ feedback. Effectively, the very first comment you, as the respondent *and* assessor makes on a participant’s written

<sup>2</sup> From now on, unless directly cited as ‘students’ in a source (as in the extract from Hounsell et al, 2007), all references must be assumed to be ‘participants’ to maintain a specific focus on the SPS course.

<sup>3</sup> Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934): Russian psychologist who originated much of what has become known as Social Learning Theory. Key terms relevant to his work: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and ‘More Knowledgeable Other’ (MKO).

submission, begins an act of communication. This sounds horribly like stating the obvious but nevertheless is worth pausing to give thought to. Several perspectives come to mind. The first is that in the context of the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course a fairly uncommon situation prevails, particularly perhaps for anyone teaching on it for the first time. Without exception, all participants are academics. Without exception, facilitators and/or assessors are also academics. In other words, both groups are *colleagues*. If you were all to meet up at a conference for example, perhaps one or two even being members of the same panel discussion, a quite different relational dynamic might exist between you than that evoked by the ‘student/participant-assessor’ relationship. Additionally, in some course contexts, there could be participants holding institutionally higher status positions than facilitators and/or assessors. Again, the taken-for-granted assumptions often made by both parties about the ‘student/participant-assessor’ relationship can be unsettled. While it is clear that the range, nature and depth of experience and knowledge between facilitators, assessors and participants is unique and sets each apart from each other, holding the collegial construct foremost in your mind when responding to participants’ writing, is however, a useful point of departure for securing and maintaining the foundations of the relationship<sup>4</sup>.

A second useful consideration on the relational nature of ‘giving and receiving’ feedback comes from Higgins *et al* (2001: 273). They say that by ‘looking at feedback as an essentially *problematic* form of communication involving particular social relationships, we may begin to understand how external conditions interplay, mediate (and are mediated by) patterns of power, authority, emotion and identity ...’ However, in Higgins *et al*’s view, it is not enough to stop at what they term this ‘outside-in’ approach. To complement it must also be an ‘inside-out’ approach by which they mean that those who are doing the assessing, need to first ‘question their own assumptions about knowledge, concepts, rules and conventions’ (*ibid*). They identify Barnett (1990) as making the further critical observation that no assumptions can be made about shared understandings between disciplines either, about ‘knowledge, concepts, rules and conventions’, particularly as most of this understanding is tacit and thus hard to articulate and make explicit.

In short, the contribution made by Higgins *et al*, and Barnett here, to the ‘deepened’ discussion around being a writing respondent and assessor, is twofold - begin by constructing this dual role as a *problematic* i.e. the only assumptions you can make about it is that you can make no assumptions about it; and secondly, that unpacking the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course assignment assessment criteria and Exit Level Outcomes explicitly, in discussion and debate with your participants, in Phase 1, is crucial to achieving some measure of mutual and consensual understanding of what is expected of everyone.

The last perspective offered here is not limited to responding to participants’ writing only but a powerful strategy in all academic development and HEI pedagogic contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this relational dynamic is not so very different at postgraduate level where you, as a supervisor, are providing feedback on a scholar’s work in order to ensure their work is perceived as that of an equal independent member of your own discipline.

This can be loosely termed as that of ‘entering a scholarly conversation’. A very prevalent phenomenon in student writing, beginning at undergraduate level (though no doubt a legacy of schooling) but remaining common through all degree levels, is a lack of awareness of ‘a reader’; that what is being written is in fact directed towards Another, someone ‘out there’. While in the majority of cases for students, this ‘Other’ is the lecturer and/or examiner, the reality is that these ‘Others’ are already members of one or more ‘Knowledge Communities’. First year students may be very hesitant members of any Knowledge Community but by virtue of entering a discipline, it can be argued that they have earned an ‘entry membership’ and should be encouraged to claim it. Postgraduate level students and academic staff are of course, established members of knowledge generating communities and many consistently contribute to the expansion and securing of their community’s knowledge boundaries. So, as stated in the RU Learning Guide on Responding to Student Writing (2015:13), ‘Academic work does not exist in isolation - it exists in a ‘field’ or a conversation’ and that ‘a good way to think about what is often termed ‘the literature’ is as a conversation. All the authors of those books and papers ... are, in fact, talking to each other’.

When responding to *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course participants’ submissions where a clear lack of reader awareness is evident or inconsistently applied, drawing on the notions of ‘being in conversation’ and this conversation being ‘scholarly’ because we all belong to a wider community and are legitimate members thereof, can bring a new dimension of insight to a writer’s sense of who they are and the purpose of their writing. Even if all these Others do not own this particular notion of identity, when the possibility and the feasibility of such an identity is made transparent, experience shows that it changes and challenges participants’ perceptions of themselves. Again, having this discussion in Phase 1, explicitly, is highly recommended, but reinforcing it through comments in written work does much to build confidence and a scholarly, doctoral identity.

### **‘Meaning’ first, error correction later**

Focusing on a participants’ grasp of ‘meaning’ first, that is, their conceptual understanding, rather than spelling and grammatical proficiency, is drawn to your attention at several points during the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course. For this reason, this supplement does no more than highlight it again here as a critical principle to observe when responding to participants’ writing, but does not expand on the issue any further. Suffice to say that our emphasis in giving feedback on participants’ assignments should be on encouraging conceptual depth and coherence and not on surface level correction. This is not to say we should ever accept below par proofreading but rather that we should indicate when this is a major issue and require that the participant address this.

### **Plagiarism**

The issue of plagiarism affects all of us in higher education. With the lightning speed at which new knowledge is being produced and disseminated; the ease with which this knowledge can be accessed and incorporated into one’s own ‘repertoire’ without it always being acknowledged, it is not surprising that institutional policies and procedures to address ‘acts of plagiarism’ are proliferating and under constant revision. Very strong views are held by some academics about how acts of plagiarism should be dealt with.

As Angelil-Carter says, 'Plagiarism is seen [by many in the Academy] as deceitful and dishonest, its perpetrators are fraudulent, and must be severely penalised. The language used is often about crime and investigation - 'perpetrators', 'theft', 'penalise' - and there seems to be perfect (unspoken) clarity on what constitutes 'intellectual property' (2000:1). And of course, there are indeed cases where the deliberate, calculated 'theft' of another's work - their 'intellectual property' - is exposed. Interestingly, however, this type of 'stealing' is usually exemplified in its most sophisticated form when it is done by academic staff, rather than students. Aside from well publicised South African cases, there is the case of the male immunology professor, thought to be the worst involving academic fraud uncovered in Singapore, which was publicised in their national press in January 2013. The National University of Singapore officials described it as misconduct on an "unprecedented" scale. The academic was found guilty of fabricating more than 20 research papers published in international academic journals after a major investigation lasting almost two years.

But it is not this level of planned deceit that is our deep concern here. Angelil-Carter makes the very important observation that, '... plagiarism is a complex, contested concept, and in student academic writing it may be the surface manifestation of complex learning difficulties which relate to the educational environment, the nature of academic discourse and the nature of language' (ibid:3). Clegg & Flint (2006:385) describe it similarly, defining plagiarism 'as a complex and multifaceted set of phenomena with multiple causes, . . . a chaotic conception'. In the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course, despite the fact that all participants are academics and probably facing 'the problem of plagiarism' amongst their own students, it is possible you will come across instances of it in their writing. What we would urge you to do in these cases, is to consider Angelil-Carter's and Clegg and Flint's views above, and pause before you comment in response to the incident.

In general, research into plagiarism (in addition to Angelil-Carter, 2001, read Clarke, 2006, de Jager & Brown, 2010, and others) shows that, particularly (but not always), when the language of learning is not the first language of 'learners', '[I]n attempting to approximate the language of the discourse, students may resort to using sequences of words and even sentences from other writers, perhaps replacing odd words with synonyms or altering word order, but without quotation marks indicating where their own voices begin or end. They may also construct entire essays or assignments in this manner, by knitting together appropriate passages from a range of sources, using their own words only to provide the linking sentences' (de Jager & Brown, 2010:515).

Now fairly obviously, the participants on the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course are not first year students or undergraduate students of any kind. Nevertheless, if any written work does show evidence of 'plagiarism', it is important to consider the reasons for why this could be happening. As for any of us, when we enter a new 'field' (after Bourdieu) and encounter new discourses, and subsequently engage in academic texts unfamiliar in genre, theoretical and conceptual framing, ontological positioning and so on, it is difficult to master and 'own' those new discourses. It is even more challenging to articulate them in writing, most especially for a peer audience. So the strategies outlined above by de Jager and Brown (ibid) as commonly resorted to by undergraduates, may also be resorted to by insecure, anxious participants on the

*Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course. The key decision you have to make is whether such ‘plagiarism’ is *intentional and calculated to deceive, or it is unintentional and relatively benign*. How, you may ask, does one distinguish between the first and second forms of plagiarism, and how can one respond to both?

The following ‘Letter to Lex’ reflects one way of dealing with the problem just posed. It is not intended as a formula or inferred as the only way to approach the issue but simply offered as a point of departure - one sourced from a real scenario that ended with a very positive outcome.

The choice of the genre of a ‘letter’ to address the matter of plagiarism was chosen by the facilitator in this case because it was flexible enough to allow substantive principles related to ‘intentional’ and ‘unintentional’ plagiarism to be (re)addressed, and the students’ complicity in these issues. It simultaneously allowed the facilitator to sustain the respectful and harmonious relationship with the student that was established in the contact session. Needless to say, providing such an extensive response is time consuming, but if formative feedback is quintessentially about promoting further learning, then it is difficult to escape the investment of time.

*Dear Lex*

*I know the focus of your study is an important one and I could tell from my time with you that you are committed to it. And I think it is a very important area to research.*

*However, having said that, and after spending hours and hours working through this proposal, I would like to have a very serious conversation with you. I know I am not your supervisor and I do not wish to become involved with anything that you and your supervisor have discussed or agreed on. So, I am speaking only in my capacity as the facilitator of the course you attended and responding to your request that I have a look at this proposal and give you feedback - nothing more.*

*I have made many comments down the margin as you will see, and they relate to a number of different issues. But the first and most critical that I want to raise with you, is the extent to which you have plagiarized from sources off the internet. I have to use the word *plagiarize* purposefully here because it is quite clear to me that you knew what you were doing i.e. cutting and pasting other people’s work, word for word, and not acknowledging that you had done this. In other words, you did not use quotation marks to indicate when another researcher/ writer was speaking and when it was you who was writing, and neither did you reference accurately or honestly.*

*If you remember in our sessions, we talked a lot about plagiarism - how in all universities it is regarded as very serious matter and can regularly lead to a disciplinary hearing, and often expulsion. But I made the distinction between two groups of students. The one group consists of students who borrow other people’s words because they are still struggling to find the language of their discipline and/or the appropriate academic discourse to write what they have to write. So they are on a journey towards acquiring academic literacy and over time will become stronger and stronger scholars. And so this group of students tends to use too much of other people’s work/words, and very often do not acknowledge and/or reference correctly. This is of course, also wrong, but the main thing is that this group is not setting out to be deceitful i.e. it is not an intentional act to deceive readers/ to lie.*



*Then there is the second group who intentionally/ deliberately takes other people's work - perhaps because they are too lazy to do the work themselves and/or they think they can get away with it. It is this group who it is right to accuse of plagiarism. If you scroll down you will see a number of sections in this proposal highlighted in different colours. These are all chunks of text that I found on the internet (and I have given you the sources where I found them) that you have 'lifted'/ cut and pasted - plagiarized - without making any attempt to a) acknowledge accurately and honestly, or b) engage with and write from your own understanding. At doctoral level, Lex, this just cannot happen. The sources you search for and find can only be 'evidence' to support the ideas and claims/ argument you are making. From Section 2.5 right through to the end of Section 3 is probably about 80% word for word from the internet.*

*I am not sure what you are going to do about all this now as I do not know if your proposal has been submitted to your Higher Degrees Committee or not. My personal opinion is that it should be rejected immediately! I would recommend you go back to the beginning. Start a Reading Journal as we talked about - for each article you think is relevant (for the 'literature review' and 'literature' related to your methodology, and your 'theory'). When you know you have fully understood all the different areas, writers etc. and how each one relates to the other, then start drafting another proposal. This will take a lot more time than you probably ever imagined you would spend on this proposal, but if you want to earn a Masters degree that you can claim as your own, and be proud of, I think it would be worth it.*

*I wish you well.*

The facilitator of Lex's proposal received an email from him thanking her for being so straightforward and honest with him. He admitted to being too hasty and too lazy, but added that he had struggled too with a very absent supervisor - another issue always to be borne in mind. He assured her that he would do his best to review his proposal and work honestly in future. There was no follow up on this case so no long term 'benefits' of this type of response can be claimed.

Another direct approach to confronting evidence of plagiarism is to search for and present, the actual sources (usually websites) from which text/s have been taken (such as by using Turnitin or other software). I have done this on numerous occasions at all levels of postgraduate study and in the context of many different staff development programmes. Although it can at times be time consuming task tracking down sources, especially when the software fails to immediately identify these, it is extremely difficult for a student/ participant to deny use of a source and/or claim 'own ideas and words' when faced with authentic website addresses. The following is a comment I wrote in response to one participant's plagiarised texts.

This whole paragraph - except for perhaps one or two words - has come from the internet. I found bits of it on the following 2 sites:

<http://personal.denison.edu/~matthewsn/facebook%20and%20academic%20performance.pdf> in a journal article. The title of the paper is 'Facebook and academic performance' by Paul A. Kirschner a,\*, Aryn C. Karpinski, and the journal is Computers in Human Behavior 26 (2010) 1237-1245.

The second site is: [www.ukessays.com](http://www.ukessays.com) › Essays › Education, and bits seem to come from one section of this. IF I am right about THIS site, DO NOT EVER USE it. It is a very dangerous site to draw from as the people who run it are committing major fraud by writing essays for students who pay them to do it.

## Exemplars of authentic feedback in response to specific elements of writing

### 1. Feedback provided towards structure and logical development of ideas.

#### 1.1 UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

*As a supervisor, the gender of a student does not affect me personally. However, one is aware that according to the African culture that is patriarchal male domination may exist. One need to set boundaries when building a working relationship with clearly sets the rules of engagement. There is also a need to develop a working contract that is easy to understand to facilitate the process. The contract also may safe guard issues that may be perceivable as unfair practices and regulate memorandum of understanding between the student and supervisor.*

[Note: This was the only paragraph provided by the writer under 1.1.]

*When I saw this heading I expected, as a READER, to read something about 'social exclusion and discrimination' in general before being taken into more specific areas such as gender, race, etc. Can you do this, and draw on some of the readings you were given, to 'set up' the context for discussion*

*During my time at X University I was exposed to social exclusion, mostly on the basis of gender. My PhD studies was in male rugby and at the time I was also working at the Rugby Institute. The challenges that I faced was that not many took my studies, not my knowledge and opinion seriously. The barriers that I had to overcome hindered my knowledge production. Although my studies was related to male rugby, my supervisor was very supportive and although he was a male too, I never felt being excluded just based on my gender. I did however experience the power relationship in terms of authority.*

*Here would be a good place for you to draw on the notion of 'intersectionality', don't you think? You could also make use of relevant readings from Theme 1 (see page 16 of PG) to support claims you might want to make.*

*A concern for me at this point, since your structure indicates an end to Theme 1 here, is that you make no mention of ‘power’ – as a critical force and variable in the supervisor-student relationship. I know ‘relationships’ are here, but not an explicit engagement with the complexities of power. If this comes later, I will note it, but then some shifting of sections could happen?*

*Through these resources I believe a humanising pedagogy emerges. While there are institutional processes and contracts to be followed, there is an unpredictable, negotiated path which will require a more intimate, emotional yet ethical relationship with the student. There is a development of the relationship from master/apprentice ie hands-on approach, especially in the initial phase, to a more collegial relationship ie hands-off approach towards the end of the candidature.*

## 2. Feedback towards a deeper engagement

*On the surface this sounds like a generous, emancipatory thing to do. BUT, what do you REALLY mean? What does this ‘freedom’ look like? What kinds of ‘mistakes’ are you letting students make? **How does any of this relate to them becoming scholars?** What if you don’t notice that their ‘own way’ is leading them somewhere unhelpful until it’s too late? What if their ‘mistakes’ are really hard to put right? I’d like you to explain this in a bit more depth and to critically reflect on it too.*

*I always thought the supervisor is the most important aspect in this relationship, however currently I believe the student is. My supervision approach has moved from a supervised focussed approach to more of a student centred approach. As previously stated, I was very much concerned about the outcome, the number of graduates and what are their final marks. Now I try to develop a lifelong learner and even more so, a critical thinker. To do so, the one aspect that I have changed very much, is to give the student more freedom. In this sense I give them freedom to make mistakes, to find their own way, their own reasoning and through it develop their critical thinking.*

*I would like to know more about the Hemer (2009) paper simply so that I, as the ‘scholar’ with whom you are ‘in conversation with’ here can be allowed to engage and respond. What you may interpret as implementable ‘around a cup of coffee’, others may not, so you have to give readers something substantial with which to play. You can’t assume your readers have done the same reading as you have and bring that knowledge of those texts to your text here.*

*I found the paper by Hemer (2009) most enlightening and entertaining. This discussion followed on quite nicely from the papers by Grant in that much of what was discussed could be implemented around a cup of coffee! The paper brought a bit of stability to the ship-at-sea feeling created by the Grant papers.*

### 3. Feedback engaging in collegial conversation

*In all of the above, I believe that I should lead by example. Therefore, I also present and lead discussions during journal club meetings, I also present my research during scientific meetings and I also do my research in such a way that it is publishable in peer-reviewed journals.*

*This is great! Modelling ourselves in front of students is very powerful!*

*As a reflective practitioner, I subscribe to reflective practice as posited by Lyons (1998: 115) who argues that "Reflective practice is defined preliminarily as ways in which teachers interrogate their teaching [supervision] practices, asking questions about their effectiveness, and about how they might be refined to meet the new needs of students". This is reflected in my supervision practice.*

*Great! We need many more academics like you. It's especially useful that you only make this claim after providing examples from your own practice.*

### 4. Feedback challenging assumptions - and their linguistic realisations

*When I was head of ICT in [a university in South Africa] and had been serving in that capacity for a few years, I became curious as to why a typical student becomes so attracted to use a computer. Indeed this is not unique to our students and most people agree that it is a common feature in any part of the world. However, it was fascinating for me to see how a student who comes from a rural setting, where there has never been any opportunity to use of a computer, would firstly be totally attracted by its features and then becomes immersed by the manifold educational opportunities that present themselves.*

*We need to be very careful how we 'label' people! If you remember from the section on power relations and social inclusion/exclusion, it is very often in the language that we use that we immediately stereotype and potentially exclude students. So here, for example, who is this 'typical student'?*

*Ah, so this is the 'typical student'! I am playing Devil's Advocate here, but can you see how the way you have written here identifies and classifies only a particular group of students?*

*Are you sure about this? Manhattan? The Bronx? Paris? Soweto?*

*Who are 'our' students?*

*Ranking in what? Try not to assume your reader knows all you know – especially about economics!*

*This is similar language to ‘typical students’. Simply because you are writing in an academic context, from now on avoid this type of labelling UNLESS you are quoting someone directly. I won’t draw attention to it again but leave it up to you to make the necessary changes when you make general revisions. OK? And perhaps ask yourself what purpose these generalised shorthand categories serve and what they hide?*

*In South Africa and in particular this region, the majority of the population remain without access to ICTs and the Internet. This has resulted in South Africa losing its ranking, based on study conducted by World Economic Forum dramatically from 48 in 2008 to 72 in 2012. There is no doubt in my mind that the use of technology by the masses is the only real means by which this negative trend can be reversed.*

### 5. Feedback for teaching modality within the context of claims and evidence

In academic writing the need to pay attention to the use and function of modal verbs in English is important since, depending on the choice made by a writer, different attitudes and positions are reflected through the word/s chosen. Examples of the most commonly used modal verbs are: is/are (i.e. from the verb ‘to be), can, could, may, might, will, shall, would, should, must. The response below is one written to a participant on the SPS course. It offers an exemplar of how ‘modality’ can be ‘taught’ in-context, by an assessor. The reference to ‘greater use of modifiers’ directs the participants to words like ‘suggests’, ‘perhaps’, ‘possibly’, ‘contends that’ and so on.

X, the use of words like ‘are’, ‘is’, ‘should’, ‘must’ etc. carry a high level of ‘certainty’ - we describe them in the field of applied linguistics or sociolinguistics as having ‘high modality’. When you use them the way you have here, they have the effect of turning sentences - or ‘claims’ into statements of absolute ‘fact’ - whereas all that this first sentence holds could actually be construed as a personal opinion. Can you see this? So in a context such as this i.e. academic writing/research writing, it is important to do one of two things (sometimes you need both but not here): 1) use slightly more ‘hesitant’ language, or 2) make greater use of qualifiers. Remember you are talking TO a community of scholars sharing the same field of knowledge, so if you come over as too confident WITHOUT EVIDENCE TO BACK UP YOUR CLAIMS - you can expect some kind of ‘backlash’ - mild to severe.

## Questions you can ask in Feedback

### a. Examples of the types of questions - related to clarifying meaning, and pointing to issues linked to logic and structure - you could ask in the body of the text<sup>5</sup>:

- Can you provide evidence for this assumption? Can you see that without evidence it becomes just 'your opinion'?
- Has this been proved or is it something which you assume to be true?
- Have you read what ... says about this?
- What about ...'s point of view?
- Can you give an example of this? It would strengthen your argument if you could.
- What does this example show about ... (a specific theory/ experiment)?
- How does this link to what you have just said? Try and make your links clearer for your reader.
- How is this relevant to the argument you posed in paragraph 1?
- Can you link this idea more directly to your topic?
- How can this be applied in your own supervision context?
- You have *described* the situation. Now can you *explain* or *analyse* why...?
- What is your view of the relevance of all these different 'voices' from 'the literature'? So far you have only used quotes/ citations to sum up what others say.
- How does this relate to the specific case which you have mentioned? I can't see the link.

### b. Examples of comments and questions which target and teach language usage which often impacts on meaning, logic and structure:

- Who is 'they/ he/ it/ she' here? I can't work it out. Can you make it clearer for me?
- You start this paragraph with a strong topic sentence but only sentence/s ... (2/3/4) are linked to this topic. Can you see that?
- Remember, the connector 'however' in English, indicates a *change* in 'direction' of what is being said. Perhaps you mean 'therefore'? (This type of comment can be used for all incorrect use of connectors).
- You have written this sentence as an uncontested statement of fact (e.g. 'Psychology is an essential subject for all first year university Humanities students to take') when it is actually *an opinion* as you provide no evidence for it. It is the words 'is' and 'all' that are the problem here.
- You keep spelling the word ... like this, but it is actually spelt like this.... Please correct it all the way through.
- There is no relationship between the end of this paragraph and the beginning of the next. Can you think of a 'transitional statement' that will lead your reader from the one issue into the other?
- There is no relationship between this sentence and the one that follows/ comes before it. Can you put that right? / Perhaps if you said....?

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from: Responding to Student Writing. Brief Guide Series (Updated 2012) provided by CHERTL (RU)

## References (and recommended reading)

**Angelil-Carter, S.** (2000). *Stolen Language? Plagiarism in Writing*. Cape Town: Longman.

**Barnett, R.** (1990). *The idea of Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University.  
In Higgins, R., Hartley, P. & Skelton, A. (2001). Getting the Message Across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, (6), 2, 269-275.

**Clarke, R.** (2006). Plagiarism by Academics: More Complex Than It Seems. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, (7), 2, 91-120.

**Clegg, S. and Flint, A.** (2006). More heat than light: plagiarism in its appearing, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. (27), 3, 373-387.

**de Jager, K. and Brown, C.** (2010). The tangled web: investigating academics' views of plagiarism at the University of Cape Town. *Studies in Higher Education*, (35), 5, 513-528.

**Hounsell, D.** (2007). Towards more sustainable feedback to students. In D. Boud and N. Falchikov (Eds.), *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education: Learning for the longer term*. London and New York: Routledge.

**Higgins, R., Hartley, P. & Skelton, A.** (2001). Getting the Message Across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, (6), 2, 269-275.

*Responding to Student Writing: Brief Guide Series*. (Updated 2012). Rhodes University: Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL).

**If you are unfamiliar with Vygotsky's work, there are many books and papers available to you through the Rhodes library. The following are just two possibilities:**

**Doolittle, P.** (1995). *Understanding Cooperative Learning Through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development*. Paper presented at the Lilly National Conference on Excellence in College Teaching Columbia, SC June 2-4, 1995.

**Wass, R. & Golding, C.** (2014). Sharpening a tool for teaching: the zone of proximal development. *Teaching in Higher Education*, (19), 6, 671-684.

