

Do Read the Comments: Developing a Writer-Researcher Identity through Instructor Feedback

Charles Woods

In his article, Woods explores how students take up instructor feedback by identifying and analyzing the different genres within which instructor feedback is offered. He asserts that taking up feedback in a positive and efficient manner—whether it is online or in person, electronic or handwritten—plays an integral role in the development of a student's Writer-Researcher Identity. By exploring the subversions within the ever-evolving genre of instructor feedback through an activity theory lens, Woods offers valuable insight to both teachers and students when it comes to navigating this sometimes-confusing genre.

“I do not want to write this article. I do not want to write this article. I do not want to write this article.”

If I say this three times, turn around, look in the mirror, tap my ruby-red slippers together, and pray to the almighty sun-god, I still must write this article. The reason I do not want to write this article is because I do not want to have my writing critiqued. You are going to critique this piece of writing (you are already doing so), so I have no choice but to accept that readers will always critique my writing.

Having one's writing critiqued in the form of instructor feedback is a fundamental element in developing a **writer-researcher identity**. This identity evolves throughout a person's writing life, during the university experience and beyond, often into one's work life. Composition courses play an integral role in this development; however, the most effective way to ensure the development of a writer-researcher identity is to pay attention to instructor feedback. This article highlights the importance of valuing instructor feedback in terms of the development of a writer-researcher identity. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the importance of

acknowledging (and ultimately growing from) instructor feedback, I examine the different types of feedback instructors may offer, including the implications of using red ink versus black ink to review a student's work. Next, I'll analyze the implications of offering written feedback versus online criticism, as well as the implications of different submission guidelines (and preferences) set the instructor. I focus in particular on how instructor feedback is taken up by students to develop their writer-researcher Identity. My interest is in *how* what students take up from the feedback from instructors on assignments assists them in identifying and successfully participating in new and different genres. After assessing the implications of how instructor feedback molds our writer-researcher identity and helps us gain the knowledge necessary to participate successfully in new genres, I explore instructor feedback as a genre through the lens of **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**. I argue that CHAT can help us understand instructor feedback, which in turn allows us to analyze the development of one's writer-researcher identity. The article concludes with an interview with . . . myself, concerning the development of my writer-researcher identity as an undergraduate student at the University of Montevallo (Montevallo, Alabama).

Some of you are probably wondering right about now, "Why are you interviewing yourself?" The reason I am interviewing myself is because to successfully participate in the genre of instructor feedback, you must be willing to be vulnerable and to accept constructive criticism of your writing. Remember, the reason I did not want to write this article is because I did not want my writing critiqued. I tapped by ruby-red slippers together. I prayed to the almighty sun-god. I still must write this article.

Writer-Researcher Identity

The term **writer-researcher identity** "means you are able to think beyond just acquiring skills and begin to understand how all of your skills (and the skills you haven't yet acquired) change what you can and can't do as a writer" ("Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program"). Development of one's writer-researcher identity is central to participating in any **literate activity** and successfully navigating new **genres**. One of the primary ways in which our writer-researcher identity is shaped is by how we take up the feedback received from instructors on assignments. To participate in this genre, students must willingly accept instructor feedback of their work, an act that is unnatural, as no one likes to be criticized. (Remember, I did not want to write this article.) The ways in which feedback is provided differs from instructor to instructor based on variables such as the stakes of the

assignment, the genre in which the assignment is submitted, and how the instructor wants to represent herself.

The traditional way in which instructors provide feedback on students' work is with the mighty and all-knowing red pen. This article asks, "How is an instructor representing himself if he uses a red pen to provide feedback on an assignment?" Moreover, in what ways are instructor comments in red pen *taken up* by students? Instructor feedback in red pen is a performative intimidation tactic and unnecessarily constrains the efficient development (to the fullest potential) of one's writer-researcher identity. However, red-ink is not the only way in which instructors provide feedback to students, as some may use a different color ink (green is nice) or even a pencil. If an assignment is submitted electronically, perhaps the instructor's preference is to distribute feedback digitally. The development of digital platforms for assignment submission, syllabus distribution, online discussions, etc., such as Blackboard, Canvas, or university specific systems like ReggieNet at Illinois State University, allows instructors to provide feedback in new genres not previously accessible. Digital feedback differs from written feedback on an assignment and is taken up in a different way by students. This article acknowledges the differences in student uptake between written and digital feedback, as both develop one's writer-researcher identity.

Red Ink vs. Black Ink

The most important factor concerning instructor feedback is not how feedback is distributed, but how it is taken up by the student. Instructors have their students' best interests in mind when providing commentary on assignments, specifically in aiding a student in developing skills that lead to a diverse writer-researcher identity. To understand the genre of instructor feedback, we must acknowledge the **conventions**, or general characteristics, that mediate the genre, as there is no correct standard for distributing instructor feedback. In many cases, ink is used to comment on an assignment at either the micro- or macro-level. Therefore, using a CHAT lens to explore how different ink colors dictate how the instructor represents herself, as well as how the feedback is received by students, is essential to this pursuit. The version of CHAT used by the ISU writing program, which is specifically designed to examine literate activity, includes **representation** and **reception** as part of its seven concepts. Let's first think about representation.

What do you see when you receive an assignment back with instructor comments written in red ink all over it? Does the paper look as if it has been gutted and left for dead, the red ink mimicking blood? Instructors use red ink

for a variety of reasons, such as the stark contrast against black ink. However, using red ink is an intimidation tactic utilized by the instructor to maintain power in the dynamic relationship between herself and the student; using the mighty, all-knowing red pen, the intention of the instructor could be misrepresented by this performative act. Within the framework of CHAT, representation “highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it” (“Key Terms”). Representation within the genre of instructor feedback prompts question such as, “Is the instructor attempting to assert power?” and “How do student’s take up feedback offered in red ink versus other colors of ink?”

Defined by Joyce R. Walker in her article “Just CHATting,” reception “deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. Reception is not just who will read a text but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (75). Reception is the key concept concerning uptake of instructor feedback by students because how a student responds to feedback ultimately dictates the development of his/her/their writer-researcher identity. Instructors who wish to promote productive uptake of their feedback on the part of their students need to cultivate a keen awareness of how their feedback might be received and how different techniques and practices of offering feedback might impact reception in different ways.

Written Feedback vs. Digital Feedback

Technological advancements such as the creation of digital platforms for assignment submissions have resulted in ecological and distributive changes concerning the genre of instructor feedback. Traditionally, students received feedback in the form of written comments on assignments, but, as digital platforms such as Blackboard, Canvas, and the system specific to Illinois State University called ReggieNet become more prevalent in the university setting, the distribution practices of instructors evolve. Instructors can now have students turn in their assignments online and provide feedback digitally. This practice subverts the traditional conventions of the genre of instructor feedback, which may mean that the way feedback is taken up by students is altered. Investigation of the genre’s **ecology** and **distribution**, two other CHAT concepts, helps us analyze this subversion.

Ecological differences within the genre of instructor feedback include the differences between written feedback and digital feedback, and they inherently constrain the ways in which instructor feedback is taken up by a student. Perhaps a student would see written comments as more personal,

more direct; perhaps instructors are more likely to take a holistic approach to providing feedback digitally because of the difficulty of including comments line by line. The ecological differences of using different kinds of media and tools can affect a writer's uptake of instructor feedback. If the writer is able to make good use of the feedback they receive, then the system of communication as a whole can lead to a more diverse writer-researcher identity.

Additionally, student uptake is going to diverge if feedback is distributed in written form versus digital form. If instructor feedback is distributed in written form, the feedback is usually returned during class when the instructor sees the student. The dynamic relationship between instructor and student is challenged when the instructor distributes feedback in this way, but, if the instructor distributes feedback digitally, she can do so at her leisure whenever she has finished reviewing assignments. This may mean feedback is distributed late at night or early in the morning, times when the traditional university student may not be awake. Moreover, digital distribution removes the awkwardness of facing the instructor after receiving harsh feedback, which might alter the student's ability to maintain confidence as a writer-researcher in the classroom.

Finishing the Chat About Writer-Researcher Identity

Understanding instructor comments and how instructor feedback shapes one's writer-researcher identity can be effectively explored through the lens of CHAT. While there are seven concepts that comprise ISU's CHAT model, within the genre of instructor feedback, some concepts are more relevant than others. Moreover, some concepts are inherently working together within the genre. Since we have already explored representation and reception while discussing the implications of red ink versus black ink, and we came to understand how ecology and distribution prove relevant when we discussed written feedback versus digital feedback, let us explore the final three concepts at work in CHAT: **socialization**, **production**, and **activity**.

Socialization “describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices” (“Key Terms”). When thinking about socialization in terms of instructor feedback in a university setting, we must acknowledge that we already have instructor feedback from our previous educational experiences. So, we have to ask ourselves, “How are you socialized to interpret red marks

all over your paper? How does socialization affect how you might speak to your instructor about her feedback? If feedback seems particularly harsh, do you post on social media about it? How does social media socialize how your post, tweet, or update?”

According to her article, “Just CHATting,” Joyce R. Walker describes production as:

deal[ing] with the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools (say, using a computer to produce a text vs. using a cell phone to produce a text) and practices (for example, the physical practices for using a computer vs. using a cell phone have some similarities, but also many differences). Production also considers the genres and structures that can contribute to and even “pre-shape” our ability to produce text. . . . When thinking about or investigating production for a specific text, an author is really trying to uncover how individuals and groups create texts under specific conditions, using specific tools, and following certain practices. (74–5)

When thinking about instructor feedback as a genre, we can think about the instructor-student relationship as a dynamic relationship with inherent constraints that dictate what an instructor might offer as feedback, as well as how an instructor offers feedback. Does the instructor write comments in the margins of a printed essay? If so, does she use colored ink? Does the instructor offer feedback digitally? If so, what font is used?

“Activity is a term that encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text” (“Key Terms”). When exploring activity within the genre of instructor feedback, we must acknowledge that instructor feedback is an activity performed by a single person (the instructor) in conversation with a single audience (the student). Instructor feedback may be very well-thought out, but, if the feedback is hand-written on an assignment, the instructor only gets one opportunity to relay their comments to the student. Digital comments, however, can be revised easily before being returned to students. For an instructor, understanding the activity of making comments is necessary to assure that the comments are taken up as they were intended. From the point of view of the writer, the activity begins when they “take up” the comments and use them—perhaps to revise a particular text, but maybe also to learn things they can use in future writing situations.

An Interview with Myself

In the next section, I conduct an interview with myself about my personal uptake of instructor comments as an undergraduate student. I chose to

interview myself to emphasize the fact that one must be open to criticism and self-reflection to take up instructor feedback productively in ways that can help with the evolution of one’s writer-researcher identity. By interviewing myself, my hope is that my readers can use my experience to gain confidence as writer-researchers. The idea is that even if an assignment is returned slashed with a red pen, the writer can still take up the feedback productively and use it to develop a stronger writer-researcher identity. (Remember, I did not want to write this article.)

Question 1: How did you take up instructor feedback as an undergraduate?

As an undergraduate, there were times when I did not want to accept an instructor’s criticism of my work. It was my work, and I thought it was the best work I had ever done. Who was my instructor to say that my work was not “correct?” The reason I was not always receptive to feedback is because I thought I was the greatest writer to ever complete a specific assignment. I do not believe in the idea of correct or incorrect; rather, I prefer to think of decisions within a genre as *effective* or *ineffective*. Moreover, I was afraid to criticize myself, which really hindered the development of my writer-researcher identity. I was ignoring valuable skills I could learn to become a more diverse participant in any literate activity, and I was not learning to successfully navigate and partake in new genres. As I progressed through my undergraduate program, I learned I had to take up instructor feedback and not ignore it.

Question 2: Is there one specific tool or skill mentioned by your instructors that you struggled with more than other tools or skills in developing your writer-researcher identity?

There were many skills that were challenging for me to take up, but one I had trouble with particularly. I was an English major, so most of my assignments as an undergraduate were working within the essay genre. I cannot tell you how many essays were returned to me with instructor feedback that said things like, “Work on transitions!” or “Where are your transitional expressions or sentences?” Sometimes these comments would be underscored for emphasis, so I knew early on I needed to work on this skill to make my writing more effective, but I was stubborn. I thought my writing was effective without transitions. Typing the previous sentence was embarrassing. (Remember, I do not want to write this article.)

Question 3: Is there one specific instance where you struggled more than other instances in developing your writer-researcher identity?

I had to have a minor at my undergraduate institution, so I chose Political Science. The writing done for English assignments and the writing done for Political Science assignments are very different, something I learned

only after turning in my first essay in a Political Science class. I did not take up the instructor feedback from my Political Science instructor in an effective manner at all. I learned (or so I thought) how to write in the English department, so why were the tools that I had acquired on those assignments not translating effectively into the writing I was doing in my Political Science class? It was then that I realized that learning to navigate the genre of the essay is not discipline specific. Once I learned how to navigate within these two genres, my writer-researcher identity became more diverse.

Question 4: How did instructor feedback develop your writer-researcher identity?

When I think about the development of my writer-researcher identity as an undergraduate, I focus on two aspects of my uptake. First, I think about how instructor feedback assisted in my development on a micro-level. That is, how instructor feedback introduced me to the tools I needed to navigate a specific genre. An example of this type of tool is how I learned to incorporate transitional expressions and transitional sentences in my writing to become a better participant in the genre of the essay. Second, I think about how I took up instructor feedback on a macro-level. I understand that the feedback from instructors I received shaped my writer-researcher identity and aided my ability to perform effectively in a variety of genres, as well as to navigate genres that are new to me.

Conclusion

A diverse writer-researcher identity is fundamental to one's evolution as a student, and one way it can be developed is by paying attention to instructor feedback. My primary goal in assessing uptake from the variety of kinds of feedback (red ink versus black ink, written versus digital) instructors offer on assignments is to help readers to understand how a productive uptake of instructor feedback can lead to a more diverse writer-researcher identity and the development of a wider range of skills and knowledge that, in turn, can help a writer participate effectively in new genres. Instructor feedback also molds one's writer-researcher identity and is most efficiently explored through a CHAT lens. By interviewing myself, I have tried to participate in the genre of instructor feedback by being vulnerable to constructive criticism of my writing. (Remember, I do not want to write this article.) I did not want to write this article because I did not want my writing critiqued. I said, "I do not want to write this article!" three times, I turned around, I looked in the mirror, I tapped my ruby-red slippers together, I prayed to the almighty sun-god, and I wrote this article.

Works Cited

- “Key Terms & Concepts for the ISU Writing Program.” Illinois State University Writing Program, 12 Oct. 2017, <http://isuwriting.com/glossary/>.
- Walker, Joyce R. “Just CHATting.” *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, no. 1, 2010, pp. 63–68.



Charles Woods is an English PhD student at Illinois State University studying rhetoric and composition. In his academic scholarship, he is interested in the composition classroom as space where learning happens. After completing his MA at the University of Montevallo, in Montevallo, Alabama, he spent a few years as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, as well as his alma mater. Most days you will find him battling the ever-intensifying cold of central Illinois, highlighting important passages in academic articles, and generally trying to avoid walking down the hall to the printer. His interests include the films of Stanley Kubrick, the novels of Stephen King, too many Netflix shows to name, and his two dogs, Stanley and Peter. If he is not in the library, he is at the dog park with his wife. Make sure to follow him on Twitter [@AWritingProcess](#).