

Research Article

Contradictory Comments: Feedback in Professional Communication Service Courses

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Abstract—Background: Professional communication instructors give profuse feedback on student writing in service or introductory courses; however, professional communication has traditionally borrowed feedback practices from first-year writing. In addition, professional communication instructors have relied on lore instead of data when giving students feedback. **Literature review:** Three recent studies examine the content of feedback comments given by professional communication instructors; nevertheless, these studies open questions about how professional communication instructors enact their pedagogical values when giving feedback. **Research questions:** 1. What do instructors value when teaching professional communication service courses? 2. What do instructors emphasize in their feedback? 3. To what extent do instructors' values align with the feedback that they give on students' writing? **Research methodology:** To answer these questions, this pilot study does close qualitative work to test interview questions and a coding scheme formed by inductive content analysis. I triangulated four interviews about instructors' pedagogical values with content analysis of their 599 feedback comments on students' writing. **Results and discussion:** The results reveal three implications: Rhetorical terminology may contradict the goals of professional communication, overly conversational or directive feedback may not give students tools to improve their writing, and borrowing pedagogical training from first-year composition may not prepare instructors to teach professional communication. **Conclusion:** Tensions between instructors' values and their feedback comments highlight a lack of consensus about professional communication's pedagogical values for the service course, particularly higher order values, such as audience analysis or purpose through giving feedback.

Index Terms—Feedback, instructor training, pedagogy, professional communication, rhetoric.

Even though professional communication instructors give extensive comments on their students' writing assignments, the field of professional communication has long relied on lore, assumptions, and a limited amount of research to guide feedback practices. The scholarship that exists is limited in focus and scope, exploring the ways that students use feedback [1], [2]; comments from other students during classroom writing workshops [3]; audio versus written feedback [4], [5]; and the ways that instructors balance giving quality feedback while managing their time [6]. In workplace writing, too, more attention should be given to how writers give, receive, and use feedback on their drafts [7], [8]. While these studies yield important insights, professional communication

has yet to examine the pedagogical values and goals that instructors use when giving feedback on student writing. Recent conversations about professional communication's goals within the service course [9], [10] now need to be connected with specific teaching strategies, giving instructors the means to frame and enact their values through giving feedback. Understanding how instructors' feedback reflects their values about students' learning has important implications for research, pedagogy, and instructor training within the professional communication service or introductory course.

Professional communication needs more research-based literature to provide data-driven strategies that new instructors can use when teaching their service courses. In particular, feedback practices require closer examination, as feedback acts as a microcosm for professional communication's pedagogical goals. When I began teaching the business writing service course, I attempted to find research-based pedagogical practices to help me teach students to write in workplace genres. Although I used my technical writing experience, I mostly drew on my three years of teaching first-year composition, importing composition practices and adapting them to teach

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Practitioner Takeaway

- Professional communication service course instructors typically base their student feedback on practices borrowed from first-year writing. This pilot study investigated the feedback of four instructors using interviews and content analysis of instructor comments.
 - The results reveal that rhetorical terminology may contradict the goals of professional communication, overly conversational or directive feedback may not give students tools to improve their writing, and borrowing pedagogical training from first-year composition may not prepare instructors to teach professional communication.
 - Tensions between instructors' values and their comments indicate a lack of consensus about professional communication's pedagogical values for the service course, particularly higher-order values such as audience analysis or purpose.
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professional communication. At that first semester's end, I realized that I needed to use professional communication research to support my future service course pedagogy. However, few data-driven pedagogical studies have been published within the last decade, especially studies that examine a number of instructors' teaching practices outside the researcher's own classroom [12].

As instructor feedback in professional communication has been mostly overlooked, multiple studies are needed to address this oversight. This pilot study precedes a larger project that will examine how 25 professional communication instructors with at least five years of experience give feedback on students' resumes and cover letters. Conducting this pilot study enabled me to set up that larger, in-progress study and to test and refine my research questions, interview protocol, and coding scheme [13]. Even as a pilot study, this paper makes important, innovative points that lay the groundwork for researchers to ask further questions about giving students feedback, training new instructors, and transforming goals for students' learning into useful pedagogical strategies.

Comparing instructors' stated values in interviews to a content analysis of their feedback allows professional communication the opportunity to determine whether instructors are giving feedback in ways that they say that they value, a condition that is vital for both training new instructors and preparing students for workplace writing. This study gives special attention to how instructors think and talk about their feedback while comparing their values with real feedback on students' writing. By assessing how these align, this paper contributes to professional

communication significant knowledge about the values, methods, and assumptions that instructors use when they teach introductory courses (defined and explained in the methods section). This pilot study exposes contradictions in pedagogical training and practice, and more so, suggests that current feedback structures enforce strict genre norms that may not transfer to workplace writing.

This paper raises questions about how professional communication instructors give feedback on students' writing, allowing insight into the experiences of how student writers are being trained. In this paper, I assert that researching academic feedback will better prepare workplace writers to write and give feedback in professional contexts. Academic feedback serves as both implicit and explicit models for workplace writers, shaping their habits and ideas of how to interact with texts. In the literature review, I define feedback and the service course, outline how my research adds to the current literature on feedback, and illuminate the larger conversations that this study enters surrounding feedback and pedagogical training in professional communication.

Three research questions focus on instructors' pedagogical values, their emphases when giving feedback, and the tensions that emerge when instructors' values and feedback differ. To understand these tensions, I explain my rationale for conducting this pilot study, particularly how I triangulate instructor interviews, including a short section that asks instructors to think aloud through their comments on two student papers, with a content analysis of their combined 599 feedback comments.

The results and discussion section groups my findings with their implications, answering my

three research questions. These findings reveal that service course instructors' feedback-giving practices do not always match instructors' greater pedagogical goals in professional communication. First, using rhetorical terminology may not give students the writing tools needed for effective workplace communication. Students may be unfamiliar with rhetorical terms [9] or not have the sophisticated theoretical frameworks that their instructors possess, such as genre as social action [14]. Second, overly directive or colloquial feedback may be counterproductive for students, causing them to discount contradictory feedback. While students want supportive feedback [1], [4], [5], students most desire explanations of how and why to improve their writing [2]. Third, professional communication does not currently train instructors to give feedback on students' writing in ways that align with its greater pedagogical goals, such as matching tone to context, persuading audiences, and adapting genres to fit new contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I first define my terms around feedback and the service course. Next, I examine research on feedback within professional communication, focusing on three studies from the last decade that examine instructors' comments on student writing. Then, I highlight how larger issues surrounding feedback, namely, the framing of professional communication's pedagogical values and instructor training, impact the field of professional writing.

Defining feedback To begin, I use the term "feedback" to mean a response that an instructor gives on student writing. For this paper, I focus on summative feedback, where students receive comments on a final, graded assignment. Feedback takes many forms: in-person conferences, audio or video comments, tracked changes in Microsoft Word, in-line comments, end comments, and rubrics. While the literature uses terms such as "comments," "commenting," "assessment," and "grading," I use "feedback" because it suggests an attunement to and conversation with the student writer.

Studying feedback in professional communication has led me to study the service course, as service course instructors give feedback to the largest number of students across the discipline. Professional communication service courses enroll many students across a general undergraduate population, serving as an accessible and important

site of the pedagogical study. These service courses teach mostly non-major students to write as a service to other departments or areas of the university [15], so their goals and values must be clear to those outside professional communication. Service courses often provide the last writing instruction that students receive before graduation [16], making feedback vital to preparing students for workplace writing.

Selection of the literature for the review

Because the courses and aims of professional communication differ from other areas of writing studies, I have confined this literature review to feedback studies that focus on instructors' perspectives within professional communication. Although some feedback research exists in professional communication [3]–[5], [8], [17], this paper focuses on the medium of feedback, such as using video or audio comments, rather than instructors' perspectives or specific commenting strategies. As I began this project, I found only one empirical study from the past decade that focused on the content of instructors' comments on students' assignments in professional communication [1]; building this project's literature review led me to two others [2], [6].

Understanding feedback in professional communication

To inform feedback study from instructors' perspectives, I drew from three previous studies of instructor feedback. Still and Koerber [1] examined how students in a technical communication service course used instructor feedback to revise an assignment, providing practical advice for instructors to increase comments' usability for students. For example, Still and Koerber recommended that instructors type comments so that students do not have to struggle to read incomprehensible handwriting. However, their study focuses only on how one instructor's students responded to feedback, without questioning the instructor's perspective, pedagogical values, or the extent to which their feedback and values aligned.

Next, Taylor [2] found that students prefer comments with specific details about why their writing techniques were effective or ineffective. Comments with uncontextualized praise or comments alerting students to errors were not as useful. Students want explanations to help them understand their writing and welcome instructors' direction on how to improve their work. Reader response comments, in which an instructor comments on students' writing from a reader's

perspective, did not resonate with the students in Taylor's study. While reader response comments are ingrained in the first-year composition literature, Taylor found that students do not find this feedback style helpful because it lacks detail about why and how to improve their writing.

Most recently, Singleton and Melonçon [6] have completed a study on giving students collective feedback on assignments, finding that students require contextualization and information for fixing specific problems. Collective feedback allows instructors to address students' broadest errors in assignments while being attentive to instructors' own workloads.

From these three studies, I ground my assertion that professional communication genres require a different approach to feedback than those in first-year composition. Instead of using feedback for conversations about fixing students' writing, feedback should give students the tools to become better writers both within these courses and beyond.

Connecting feedback with framing and training issues When professional communication discusses teaching methods, including feedback on student writing, "we categorize, interpret, and explain our work from a standpoint of first-year composition" [18, p. 53], an approach that is highly problematic. Because professional communication has borrowed pedagogical training and methods, the field needs to build a focused, discipline-wide pedagogical tradition. Too often, many professional communication instructors uncritically import first-year composition teaching practices into their professional writing classrooms—despite the fact that first-year composition's values contradict professional communication's.

I make this point not to disparage the work in first-year composition, but rather to emphasize differences that are not always acknowledged in pedagogical practice. Although professional communication and engineering communication have their own traditions and orientations to writing, the current landscape of higher education clusters professional communication with English in nearly two-thirds of all programs in the US. As of 2018, 200 of 305 professional communication programs are located in English departments [19]. I argue that these disciplinary affiliations undergird much of the pedagogical training that new professional communication instructors receive, especially in English graduate programs.

Because teaching practices are borrowed from first-year composition, professional communication pedagogy courses have not had the relative standardization, importance, or focus that first-year composition teaching seminars have had for training new instructors [20], [21]. Thus, professional communication still largely relies on first-year composition graduate pedagogy seminars to form teaching assistants' values, techniques, and habits that these instructors will use when teaching service courses.

In first-year composition, instructors' goals for giving feedback have traditionally been to introduce students to scholarly prose and conventions [22]. To prepare students for academic writing, feedback in first-year composition changed from an authoritarian approach that corrects students' language and grammar [23] to reader response comments, where instructors facilitate conversations about students' writing on a personal level [24]–[26]. These reader response comments assume that students will be writing for themselves or academic audiences, not workplace audiences or high-stakes professional contexts. Even more recent developments in first-year composition, such as writing about writing [27], focus on writing as a discipline rather than preparing students for contexts outside higher education. Borrowing instructor training and teaching methods from first-year composition does not enable current pedagogy to prepare students for workplace writing.

Instead of attuning students to the writing they will complete in the university, professional communication service courses must teach students to write outside the university, teaching genres and writing techniques for professional contexts. The types of writing that students create in service courses must teach higher order skills, such as using workplace genres to solve problems, instead of lower order skills like formatting a memo correctly [10], [16]. Teaching these courses well requires expertise with the skills of workplace writing [11] as well as pedagogical training specific to professional communication. However, not all instructors who teach professional communication service courses have this experience or training [28]–[30].

This literature opens important avenues for research within professional communication. Most notably, it indicates that empirically based research on feedback is needed to help instructors understand feedback practices and develop

training practices specific to professional communication pedagogy. Although a few studies have examined feedback from instructors' perspectives, this paper still does not tie feedback practices to professional communication's larger goals. In the following sections, I explain my research questions and the methodology that I used to gather data about feedback practices. In doing so, I tie my research questions to professional communication service courses and explain how this pilot study fits into a larger project about the goals of professional communication and feedback.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because the literature that I examined exposed a need for more research on feedback specific to teaching workplace writing, I add to current conversations in professional communication by answering the following research questions.

RQ1. What do instructors value when teaching professional communication service courses?

RQ2. What do professional communication instructors emphasize when giving feedback on students' work?

RQ3. To what extent do instructors' values in teaching professional communication service courses match the feedback that they give on students' writing?

To answer these research questions, I situate this study within introductory professional communication courses, otherwise known as service courses. In a recent special issue of *Programmatic Perspectives* centered on the service course, Schreiber et al. [11] assert that service courses are places both to examine best practices in pedagogy and workplace writing, and to serve as catalysts for improving teaching and communication practices. In the issue's critical postscript, Lisa Melonçon calls for researchers

to understand better with actual empirical evidence the feedback practices of instructors in the field and whether or not the existing practice of individualized feedback can be altered without impacting student learning. [12, p. 223]

Because professional communication relies on lore about feedback and borrows pedagogical training and methods from first-year composition, instructors and researchers truly do not know the extent to which instructor comments help students to improve their writing. In the next section, I outline my study design, including recruiting

instructors, conducting interviews, coding data, and acknowledging limitations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer my research questions and build on previous studies of instructor feedback in professional communication, I triangulated instructor interviews with a text-based approach. As a field, professional communication has very little data about how instructors think and talk about giving feedback on student work [2], so interviewing made a logical choice for answering questions about what instructors value and about their perceptions of what they emphasize when teaching service courses. In each interview, I asked instructors to talk through each comment they gave on two of their students' assignments; this loose think-aloud protocol to examine feedback [1] provided additional data that I could compare to both instructors' pedagogical goals and their written feedback. Looking at instructor feedback on students' work—given before instructors agreed to participate in the study—allowed me to see how instructors really interact with students' writing as they teach. Conducting inductive content analysis [31] enabled a close investigation of instructor feedback according to each comment's topic and function. Interviews and content analysis provided interrelated data points, yielding insights into how instructors give feedback and how their comments are influenced by their pedagogical values.

Before moving into participant recruitment and demographics, I want to address the small number of participants in this pilot study. In qualitative studies such as this one, professional communication articles usually include an average of 12 participants [12]. Further legitimizing my approach, I point out that professional communication has often published articles with small numbers of participants, including one [32], three [33], and one [34], respectively. In this paper, I have triangulated instructor interviews about instructors' goals and feedback with their actual comments, producing "thick description" [35, p. 2] of how instructors approach commenting on students' work. Despite the small number of participants in this four-instructor study, these findings are impactful for pedagogy and need to be circulated, as they have important implications for how instructors give feedback on student writing.

Recruitment This pilot study received Institutional Review Board approval (#17.223) from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee on

TABLE I
INSTRUCTOR AND SERVICE COURSE DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Gender	Status	Course Taught	Semester	Type	Rubrics
Joan	Female	Graduate Student	Technical Writing	Spring 2017	Online	Yes
Don	Male	Lecturer	Business Writing	Spring 2017	Face-to-face	No
Peter	Male	Graduate Student	Business Writing	Fall 2016	Online	Yes
Peggy	Female	Graduate Student	Health Science Writing	Spring 2017	Online	Yes

February 27, 2017. I used opportunistic sampling to test my study design with professional communication instructors who taught service courses at my home institution. In opportunistic sampling, researchers recruit participants within their personal networks who fit within purposeful research criteria, and it is an appropriate method for a small pilot study [35]. From 12 eligible instructors, none of whom were tenured or tenure-track, I recruited four instructors who taught business, technical, or health science writing during the Fall 2016 or Spring 2017 semesters at our urban, Midwestern university. Many instructors were hesitant to participate in this study, mentioning the time commitment involved in redacting student information from the assignments or their reticence to allow an outside researcher access to students' assignments, even with identifying data removed. In these professional communication service courses, instructors have no curricular requirements other than including a discussion or assignment around oral communication; they create their own syllabi, select their own textbooks, and write their own assignment sheets.

Demographics Despite the small number of instructors who participated in this paper, the participation gives a representative snapshot of different professional communication courses taught at the university during the 2016–2017 academic year (see Table I). Instructors who participated taught two sections of business writing, one section of technical writing, and one section of health science writing. This paper features an equal number of white men and women. Joan, Peter, and Peggy were the Ph.D. students in the professional writing program; they each taught online, using rubrics and digital tools, such as Microsoft Word or learning-management systems for grading. Don, a Lecturer, taught face to face, handwrote his comments, and did not use rubrics.

Instructors' pedagogical training also varied. During their interviews, Peter and Peggy mentioned working in writing centers as undergraduates and using non-directive feedback to tutor students. Neither had teaching experience nor training in first-year composition. As graduate student teaching assistants, Joan, Peter, and Peggy had all taken a required professional communication pedagogy course that focused on workplace genres, such as letters, memos, and emails; the course did not include formalized instruction on feedback-giving practices. During his interview, Don mentioned that he employed a more direct feedback style in business writing than he would in the first-year composition courses he concurrently taught. Since Don had not taken a formal course in teaching professional writing, his case shows an instructor importing teaching methods from first-year composition to professional communication service courses.

Instruments and Procedures To examine instructors' values and emphases when giving feedback in professional communication service courses, I conducted a semistructured interview with each instructor between March 9, 2017, and May 1, 2017. Before each interview took place, instructors sent me feedback on de-identified student work from one section of a professional communication service course that they taught during Fall 2016 or Spring 2017. I then selected two of their students' assignments with unusual feedback for use during the interview.

Each interview lasted between 22 and 28 minutes; as these were instructors I knew from my university, each interviewee felt comfortable speaking right away. For gatekeeping questions [36], I asked instructors about teaching their service course and their workflows for giving feedback. In the interview's second part, I asked each instructor to explain each comment given on two of their students' de-identified assignments.

Asking instructors to explain comments that they had already given allowed me to use feedback that instructors had given before participating in this paper, so they would not allow participating in this paper to influence their comment giving. During the interview, I used a “retrospective recall technique because users are not as cognitively overwhelmed” by separating interviews about their feedback from their initial feedback-giving tasks [1, p. 213]. This think-aloud protocol, borrowed from usability studies, allowed me to examine instructors’ thoughts about their feedback so I could compare their stated values with the feedback they had given on their students’ work.

Coding instructor interviews and feedback comments

Conducting content analysis of summative feedback on students’ writing gave insight into instructors’ practices; this practice also showed how instructors’ values in their interviews differed from the values that their written feedback emphasized. For instructor feedback, I coded 599 comments using the coding scheme developed in this project via inductive content analysis [31] because pre-existing feedback coding schemes from other researchers [2], [37] were not situated within the professional communication service course. During each round of coding, I used “in-vivo codes” [35, p. 129] to preserve the language that instructors used in their comments and to describe their values. I completed three rounds of analysis to develop this coding scheme.

- Round one: I completed “open-coding” [35, p. 189] on Joan’s and Don’s interviews to see what broad themes emerged from the data. For example, during Joan’s interview, she discussed her goals for student writing: “I would like students to leave knowing the appropriate style for the context.” In open-coding, I marked this comment as “tone” and “rhetorical” to begin establishing coding categories.
- Round two: Using the themes from Round one, I coded the feedback from each instructors’ first three assignments and compared results to the transcripts from all four interviews.
- Round three: I coded all instructor feedback on student work using the coding scheme refined during Round two. Then, I re-examined each interview with the updated coding scheme to ensure that I had not missed any data.

Each comment could be coded into multiple categories—for example, one of Peter’s comments coded to both purpose and audience: “Your introduction is very me-focused you also need to tell the readers what they will get out of the

following talks.” Since Joan gave only end comments on her students’ writing, I counted each of those comments as a single comment, coding sections into appropriate categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the results from the instructor interviews and content analysis of their feedback. To answer my primary research questions, these results address instructors’ values when giving feedback on their students’ writing, what instructors emphasize when giving feedback, and the extent to which instructors’ written comments match their overarching values.

What do instructors value when teaching professional communication?

To answer this research question, I present quotes from the instructor interviews. Because I wanted to understand what instructors profess to value when teaching service courses, I asked this interview question: “What do you want your students to know when they leave your (professional communication service) course?” In their answers, all four instructors discussed how they value teaching students to write for specific purposes and audiences in their professional communication service courses. Within this framework, each instructor took a different approach to conceptualize the tools that he or she believed that his or her students needed most, such as the ability to match tone to context, persuade readers, and practice audience awareness.

Joan: In her technical writing course, she said that she wanted her students to learn how to match their style and tone with context. During her interview, she spoke about using tone when writing announcements for her online students because she wanted to build a welcoming classroom environment. She attempted to model how tone and style could match different situations, as her tone in class-related announcements differed from her feedback.

If there is one thing that or one area that I see students really need improvement in, it’s writing in a way ... that’s not conversational ... I try to stress what kind of language is appropriate for what context ... I would like students to leave knowing the importance of assessing what is the appropriate tone and style for the context. Knowing that can be different.

Along with valuing teaching students to align their style with their writing context, Joan also valued clarity and meaning in students' writing. The second half of her interview asked Joan to discuss her feedback on two of her students' assignments, then explain why she gave those specific comments. In her feedback, Joan told her students to include an "appropriate amount of detail balanced with clarity and conciseness and brevity," referencing Lanham's maxim about professional communication aiming for "Clarity, brevity, sincerity" [38, p. 216]. Joan elaborated on that comment in her interview, saying "If something is unclear, I say 'what does this mean?'" To help students write more clearly, Joan connected clarity with meaning as her secondary pedagogical goal.

Don: In his business writing class, Don valued teaching students to write for their audiences. In the interview, Don spoke eloquently about audience as the essence of his service course.

I mean sure for sure you need to know how to write for different audiences it seems like they're [students] often writing for themselves, and I feel like business writing's one of the few classes that actually helps them ... to write for different audiences. I think that's the most important thing—that they have a clearer sense of strategies that they can use to reach these different audiences. So how do you persuade someone who doesn't want to agree to an idea? How do you deliver information for a receptive or a resistant audience?

Although Don mentions writing for different audiences, he does not define what that looks like for students beyond the divide of writing for themselves in first-year composition versus writing for an audience in professional communication. To this end, Don said that he gave feedback that fostered "you-centric writing" when students contacted potential employers through their resumes and cover letters. Don's written feedback assisted his students in managing the differing levels of power between a hiring manager and job applicant through polishing tone and style. Don's discussion of persuasion emphasizes Aristotle's definition of rhetoric: "An ability, in each (particular) case, to see the available means of persuasion" [39, p. 36]. Instead of looking at specific ways to persuade audiences, Don holistically views audience analysis as a persuasive tool to help students reach specific outcomes—to do so, Don's teaching gives students "a clearer

sense of strategies" to reach their workplace audiences.

Peter: To Peter, the most important part of business writing was ensuring that

[students] can analyze their situation and identify typical ways of responding within that situation, in terms of formal characteristics of the response in individual features and also the more relational, rhetorical

In his interview, Peter expressed frustration about rigidly teaching genre as form [40], instead of the more flexible approach championed by genre as social action [14] that emphasizes the action that the writer wishes to perform. Peter's interview occurred six months after he taught the memo assignment that he submitted for this study; he had designed his business writing assignments to give students leeway with genre forms, but many of his comments ask students to single-space their memos and format references. Peter realized that he desired to include more complicated, flexible approaches to genre in his future teaching.

To explain how the memo morphs into an email, and how an email is kind of a medium, but kind of also genres within an email, you know, how a genre changes and develops and how to analyze an audience or a situation. Those are more complex things.

Peter wanted students to understand genre as social action [14] when they leave his business writing classroom, seeing his role as giving students a functional, not form-based, idea of genre. Peter equates teaching a form-based approach to business genres with lower order teaching and writing skills. Teaching students to become rhetorically astute professional communicators requires a more nuanced view of genre than handing students a list of examples or forms. Yet Peter mentioned giving up on teaching memo format because students did not understand it and would not use it in their future work.

Peggy: After her health science writing class, Peggy wanted her students to understand rhetorical situations in their future workplace writing. For every assignment, Peggy asked her students to complete a rhetorical analysis memo, analyzing how they used writing strategies to address their purpose, audience, and context.

If [students] walk away with the ability to understand and analyze their audience, purpose, and context, I feel like that's probably the main focus that I want them to have. I think visual

design is all wrapped up in that ... Understanding how to maximize documents for that sort of thing, but that's part of analyzing purpose, audience, and context ... that is the main takeaway I want them to have. That is why I require them, for every assignment to talk about the rhetorical situation.

Peggy also defended how she heavily marked her students' grammar, tone, and style mistakes, saying that

Students like that I really mark up their work ... even though the research says that they won't focus on the more important things if you give them grammar feedback. I have never, ever seen that in my own students' work.

Despite this position, Peggy explained that giving her students direct grammatical correction contradicted her previous training as an undergraduate tutor in a writing center.

What do professional communication instructors emphasize when giving feedback comments on students' work? Each instructor who participated in this study had a different feedback style. In the interviews, I contextualized each instructor's feedback style by asking them to talk through their comments on two student assignments. All four instructors viewed feedback both as a way of imparting knowledge to their students and of building students' motivation in the service course, particularly in the online classroom. In their feedback, these instructors valued readers' needs, genre norms, and engaging students in conversation about purpose and audience (see Table II).

Joan: Unlike the other three instructors, Joan's comments on her students' work stayed consistent with her thinking during the interview. Joan gave one end comment per student; she mentioned that she used the comment box in her learning-management system, instead of downloading student work and giving in-text comments. To build her relationship with her students, Joan struck a balance between encouragement and directive feedback, beginning each end comment with "Nice work! Just a few comments:" before giving students a list of issues to fix in their next assignment. Although students' tone and style were important in Joan's comments, Joan mentioned "reader's needs" most often (in 21 of her 23 end comments). Only one reader's needs comment was a compliment; the rest asked questions that focused her students' attention on how they could better align their writing with their

readers' needs. As shown in Table II, Joan's second priority was tone or phrasing (found in 19 of her 23 end comments), matching the emphasis on style and tone from her interview.

Don: Although Don mentioned that he valued audience and persuasion during his interview, Don mostly commented on genre norms, tone, and grammar when giving feedback on his students' resumes and cover letters. In his interview, Don mentioned that at least five of his 23 students would use the resume and cover letter to apply for an existing job, so he wanted to give his students directive feedback to improve their work in this high-stakes genre. A total of 53 of Don's 245 handwritten comments focused on correcting students' genre and formatting gaffes. Unlike the other three instructors in this pilot study, Don did not write any end comments. In 47 of his 245 comments, Don corrected his students' tone, style, and phrasing. A total of 41 comments focused on grammar, such as correcting word choices and adding missing commas.

Peter: During their interviews, both Peter and Peggy emphasized how genre as social action [14] shaped their teaching practices, as both wanted students to understand how purpose and audience shape workplace genres. In his 151 comments, Peter gave 35 purpose comments and 42 audience comments; 26 of these comments mentioned both purpose and audience. When responding to one student's TED Talk summary memo, Peter wrote, "Your introduction is very me-focused ... you also need to tell the readers what they will get out of the following talks—why they should keep reading!" Here, Peter grounds his advice on the social action that the writer should be doing: persuading the reader that watching the TED Talks will be useful. Out of his 151 comments, Peter made 27 comments about format and organization within the memo. Beyond adhering to genre as social action [14], Peter's comments emphasized readers' needs, asked content-related questions, and complimented students.

Peggy: In her 180 comments, Peggy's values in giving students feedback were like Peter's, with 43 audience comments and 34 purpose comments; 24 of these comments were coded as both purpose and audience. In her assignment, Peggy asked students to write a fundraising letter for a fictional student organization, and then write a short-rhetorical analysis examining how he or she had made specific writing choices to target purpose, audience, and context. For each of her 23 students, Peggy gave two end comments: One on their letter and

TABLE II
COMPARING INSTRUCTORS' STATED VALUES TO THEIR FEEDBACK

Name	Total Comments	Stated Values	Most Emphasized Comments	Most Numerous Comments
Joan	23 end comments	"I would like students to leave knowing the importance of assessing what is the appropriate tone and style for the context."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 tone/phrasing • 17 context • 16 coded to both tone and context 	21 end comments on reader's needs
Don	245 comments (no end comments)	"I mean sure for sure [students] need to know how to write for different audiences." Persuasion. Conciseness. Format. Visual design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 audience • 3 argument/persuasion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 53 genre norms for cover letters and resumes • 47 tone, style, or phrasing • 41 correcting grammar
Peter	151 comments	Students should "analyze their situation and identify typical ways of responding." Formal Characteristics. "Rhetorical, relational."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 purpose • 42 audience • 26 coded to both purpose and audience • 8 about context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 purpose • 42 audience • 27 memo format and organization
Peggy	180 comments	Students should "walk away with the ability to understand and analyze their audience, purpose, and context," plus visual design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 34 purpose • 43 audience • 24 coded to both purpose and audience • 18 context • 19 visual design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 34 purpose • 43 audience • 20 tracked changes to grammar • 12 asking students to include signature on letter

one on their rhetorical analysis. In an end comment on one student's rhetorical analysis, Peggy wrote,

Your rhetorical analysis is well-written. In the future, try providing more specifics about how you adapted to the audience, purpose, and context under those headings.

This comment demonstrates how Peggy tied purpose, audience, and context together when giving her students feedback.

To what extent do instructors' values in teaching professional communication service courses match the feedback that they give to students on their work? In this pilot study, each instructor used different values to teach professional communication service courses; however, their feedback did not always match what they said that they wanted their students to learn. These differences between instructors' values and

the comments that they gave on students' writing provide insight into how these four professional communication instructors teach service courses at an urban, Midwestern university. Although instructors spoke about teaching professional communication rhetorically, emphasizing context, audience, and genre theory, their comments on student writing focused more on microlevel issues of correctness in tone, grammar, and formatting. The following summaries consist of each instructor's comments that illustrate the incongruity between his or her values and feedback.

Joan: Across her 23 students' emails that welcomed new employees to the workplace and the accompanying audience analysis memos, Joan's end comments stayed mostly consistent with her values. Joan wanted her students to leave her class knowing "the importance of assessing what is the

appropriate tone and style for the context.” Although she did not mention attention to reader’s needs when discussing her values, Joan commented most often on “readers’ needs” (21 occurrences). In her feedback, 19 of Joan’s comments mentioned tone or phrasing, 17 comments mentioned context, and 16 comments coded to both tone and context within the same sentence. While Joan used the standard neo-Aristotelian idea of context in her comments, she did not really explain this concept within her comments—missing an opportunity to pass on her values or give students more robust tools with which to fix their writing.

Don: Don’s comments did not align with his values of helping students learn to persuade their audiences. When teaching business writing, Don wanted to help his students polish their resumes and cover letters. During the interview, Don wondered whether he should be writing more end comments on students’ work. In Don’s handwritten comments, the circled usage issues and underlined faulty parallelisms dominated the page. It was often difficult to decipher where Don’s comments pointed or what a student’s errors were. This fact demonstrates that typed comments are more legible and accessible for students [1].

Don was aware of his tendencies to over-edit, saying, “I do think I get bogged down in, you know, some directive saying, change this or change that.” He noted that he was “bogged down” by correcting his students’ grammar and wondered whether he should shift his feedback style to focus more on global issues. Ultimately, Don justified his focus on editing because he wanted his students to clean up their writing before sending their cover letters and resumes to employers.

Don’s directive feedback gave students fixes without context about why things were wrong, except for when he pointed students to specific pages in the textbook. This feedback style may not have been the most effective for students’ learning. This approach, where Don assumes that just telling students their errors will fix students’ writing problems, merely transmits grammar or genre errors in ways that are difficult for students to read, understand, and fix. The most useful feedback points out a student’s specific error, provides a concrete fix, and explains why the error is wrong [2].

Peter: While Peter said that he valued teaching students to “analyze their situation and identify typical ways of responding,” he commented on context only eight times. The other aspects of the

rhetorical situation mattered more to Peter, as he commented more on audience (42 comments) and purpose (35 comments), with 26 comments coded as both. However, 27 of Peter’s comments focused on genre as form or formatting, taking a traditional, form-based approach to teaching genre. Instead of relating genre back to the recurring communication situation and the social action that his students wanted to achieve [14], Peter’s comments on form did not often include contextualization, just correction. Peter often wrote reader response comments, attempting to build a conversation with his online students 27 times.

Peggy: Peggy’s comments mostly matched her values: That students should “walk away with the ability to understand and analyze their audience, purpose, and context,” as well as visual design. Peggy commented on purpose 34 times and 43 times on audience, 24 comments were coded as both purpose and audience, and another 19 comments addressed visual design. Her 18 comments about context were nearly always mentioned with purpose and audience. Peggy mentioned that even though her training as a writing center tutor had taught her not to correct students’ grammar, she did so anyway. But Peggy’s student assignments contained only 20 tracked changes—fewer than I had expected based on her interview. Even with Peggy’s attention to purpose and audience in her feedback, she had 17 comments asking students to write more clearly and 16 comments asking for more conciseness—values not always consistent with genre as social action [14].

CONCLUSION

Although the four instructors in this pilot study attempted to teach their students higher order skills for fitting genres to professional situations, in practice, these instructors were teaching a basic, form-based approach to genre that lacks the flexibility that students will need to produce effective workplace writing. In other words, these instructors’ current feedback-giving practices need “to teach what genres are, rather than what they look like” [10, p. 209]. This pilot study reveals a real problem for instructor training and student development in service courses: these instructors’ feedback actively contradicted their goals for students’ learning. Although this study’s purpose was to pilot research instruments for a larger project, this pilot study revealed that instructors’ feedback deviated from their larger course goals, producing important implications for the field of professional communication.

Implications for giving stronger feedback

Answering these research questions reveals three major implications for giving feedback on students' writing in professional communication service courses. First, using rhetorical terminology may be counterproductive to professional communication's overarching goals because students may not understand the terms in the same ways that instructors do. Second, giving students overly conversational or directive comments may not be as useful for students' learning as previously thought. Without clear solutions, students may not understand the types of problems that feedback is asking them to solve. Third, training instructors to give feedback in professional communication service courses should be a priority for the field. I illustrate the pedagogical effects of each implication in the following paragraphs.

Implication 1: Emphasizing rhetorical terminology may contradict the goals of professional communication service courses: All four instructors in this study used the rhetorical terminology of purpose, audience, and context—the “rhetorical situation”—to undergird their feedback in their professional communication service courses. Using feedback to articulate higher order issues of purpose, audience, and context sometimes posed difficulties for these instructors. For example, Peggy mentioned that her students often struggled to understand context.

These data show that asking students pointed questions like Joan's “what did you mean here?” or Peter's asking his student to look at a certain spot when they revise because “[I] had to read it several times” could be an effective way to comment on student work if the questions are specific to an area that the student needs to improve. However, instructors must be specific and intentional in their feedback. Peter's questions about purpose and audience did not include further information beyond rhetorical terminology; therefore, his students may not have the information that they need to improve subsequent drafts.

Using rhetorical terminology may make sense to instructors enrolled in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition or professional communication; however, terms such as purpose, audience, context, and argument might not make as much sense to students as we might expect [2], [9]. For example, context may be a helpful term when discussing genre studies or workplace documents. However, instructors in this study mostly addressed context with purpose or

audience, or discussed context as the student's immediate writing situation. As such, professional communication instructors should re-examine how they theorize and explain specific communication choices and writing tips because students may neither understand rhetorical terminology nor know how to apply rhetorical theory to their workplace writing.

Implication 2: Giving conversational or directive feedback may contradict professional communication's goals: When giving feedback, instructors used tone and directness in different ways. Joan's end comments were directive, but sometimes general. Don's directive comments emphasized genre norms and grammar for his students' resumes and cover letters. Peter and Peggy asked questions to foster conversations about their students' writing. Using feedback to engage students in conversations about their writing is a popular practice in writing centers and first-year composition [25], [26]; however, feedback in professional communication has a different purpose: to help students use workplace genres to solve problems [2], [6]. Don and Joan's feedback adhered to this goal more than Peter and Peggy's questions about purpose and audience.

For example, Peggy's rhetorical understanding of conciseness made her give conflicting comments, causing tension between her focus on the rhetorical situation and the frequency with which she marked her students' grammar. In the following end comment, Peggy asked her student to delete excess information while making the fundraising letter longer.

I deleted “it isn't cheap” because it seemed to be repetitive. When you are revising your text, look for places where language can be cut. Being concise is almost always a good goal! Overall the letter seems just a little short. More information might be helpful in providing some additional incentive for students to participate in your event.

In this comment, the conflicting information stems from Peggy's conversational tone; looking for places “where language can be cut” contradicts Peggy's point that the student should expand the letter's content. This attempt to use feedback as a conversation with a student makes the comment's suggestions confusing. While Peggy has the theoretical tools to separate concise language use from larger issues of including appropriate amounts of information, her student probably does

not. A more directive and contextualized approach to feedback would help students and instructors better achieve the goals of the professional communication classroom.

Implication 3: Professional communication should emphasize pedagogical training practices that align pedagogical methods with course goals: The first two implications from this study illuminate a third: professional communication should no longer borrow teaching approaches and methods from first-year composition because the two disciplines have different goals for students' learning. In first-year composition, the rhetorical situation of the classroom is introducing students to academic writing, whereas in professional communication, the rhetorical situation of the classroom is bridging students into workplace writing. The need for stronger training materials in professional communication is particularly acute when examining feedback on students' writing, as instructors import feedback practices from first-year writing that do not always align with instructors' pedagogical values.

The ubiquity of rhetorical terminology in professional communication service courses reflects peer tutor training in writing centers, first-year composition pedagogy, and graduate-level work in rhetorical theory. Peter and Peggy both connected their feedback styles to work they did as undergraduate peer tutors in university writing centers. Even without teaching first-year composition, Peter understood and approached his service course pedagogy from a standpoint of first-year composition [18]. As a graduate student, Peter had taught business writing only twice and had never taught first-year composition. Instead, he relied on his writing center background and professional communication textbook to inform his teaching methods [29], [30]. Developing pedagogical research, practices, and training unique to professional communication, in response to previous calls [15], [20], would enable professional communication instructors to better articulate pedagogical goals to their students and colleagues.

Limitations This pilot study had several limitations. To better reflect those who teach professional communication service courses across the US, future research should focus on a more diverse group of instructors than four white instructors from the same university. Although including three online instructors gave insight into online teaching practices, a balance of online and

face-to-face instructors would give more reliable results. Despite the fact that studying three graduate students was helpful, focusing future studies on full-time non-tenure-track, and tenure-track faculty could tell us more about how these instructors give feedback.

Because 87% of service course faculty is contingent [15] and not necessarily trained in professional communication, more should be done to examine how contingent instructors' values align with their feedback. At this stage in the study, I did not use inter-raters because there were only 599 comments and four 22–28 minute interviews. During my three rounds of coding, I developed a codebook that I will test with inter-raters as part of my larger project. Even with these limitations and the relative lack of professional communication research on instructor comments, this pilot study allowed a deep focus and “thick description” [35, p. 3] for each instructor's pedagogy and feedback.

Although this pilot study had limitations of sample size and instructor homogeneity, it lays important groundwork for new and necessary research on instructor feedback. Future studies must further examine how

- Differences might arise in feedback between experienced professional communication instructors versus new contingent instructors or graduate teaching assistants.
- Feedback practices might vary between face-to-face and online instructors, where feedback might be the only individualized attention that online students receive.
- Training experiences might influence instructors' feedback and larger goals for students' learning, including experiences from writing centers, first-year composition, or graduate-level pedagogy and theory courses in both rhetoric and professional communication.

Better understanding of how instructors give feedback and use teaching practices to further their pedagogical values could do much to strengthen professional communication service courses.

This pilot study laid the groundwork for a larger study on how professional communication instructors give feedback. In the full study, I will use instructor interviews and content analysis of feedback much like I did in this pilot study. The full study will include 25 instructors with at least five years of experience teaching professional communication because I noticed that Don, the most experienced instructor in my pilot study, was

most articulate in describing his pedagogical goals and feedback practices. To evaluate a consistent genre of student writing, instead of the varied genres represented here, I am studying instructor comments on resumes and cover letters. For a clearer picture of instructors' pedagogical goals, I am also asking instructors to include their service course syllabi and their assignment sheets for teaching resumes and cover letters. This pilot study raised additional questions about instructors' training and theoretical orientations; in the full study, I look forward to answering them.

In this study, I set out to provide the data-driven pedagogical research that I had looked for when first teaching professional communication. This research reveals a lack of consensus about professional communication's pedagogical goals, including orientation to rhetorical terminology, directive versus conversational feedback, and instructor training. As such, borrowing pedagogical

training from rhetoric and composition does a disservice to graduate student and contingent instructors, as well as to service course students. Professional communication pedagogy courses should train new instructors to give quality feedback and emphasize how the pedagogical goals of professional communication diverge from first-year composition and writing centers.

Feedback is also a critical area for practitioners to consider because it shows how service courses are being taught, and that the information, in turn, has implications for new workplace writers. In professional communication, connecting feedback to pedagogical goals strengthens feedback in service courses, facilitates students' abilities to write in workplace genres, and improves training for new instructors. Studying how professional communication instructors can reflect their pedagogical values in their teaching and feedback-giving practices can only serve to advance professional communication pedagogy.

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