

TWO SETS OF EYES:

COMBINING THEORETICAL LENSES TO ANALYZE STUDENT FEEDBACK TO TEACHERS

By Matt Albert



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Abstract: The critical pedagogy and discourse analysis lenses contain overlap in that both lenses can be applied in examining the issue of classroom power structures. With regard to teacher-student dynamics, the lenses can be combined to examine the implications of how students deliver feedback to beginning teachers on instructional practices. This paper applies both lenses to a series of ten studies involving teacher-student feedback encounters regarding general instructional practices and classroom management. The author concludes with suggestions on why in-depth research on student feedback could potentially benefit beginning teachers looking to hone their craft.

Keywords: beginning teachers, novice teachers, student feedback, teaching practice, teacher-student relationship

What exactly happens when a student delivers feedback to a teacher about the teacher's classroom practices? On the surface, the student makes a comment about something the teacher does, the teacher receives the comment, and then the teacher has to decide what to do with that information (Goetz, 2011; Jacobs, 2010; Whittle & Campbell, 2019). The teacher can continue the conversation and delve more into what the student is saying, or the teacher can dismiss the comment and ignore the feedback (i.e., a feedback loop) (USAID, 2013). At this point, the student has some choices as well. The student can choose to press their initial comment further, try to engage the teacher in a discussion about the teaching practice, and/or exit the feedback

event as well (Bonino et al., 2014). Embedded within all of these potential decisions is a series of power dynamics which have implications for the classroom and must be considered by teachers, especially if they are new to the profession and still navigating the first few years of their careers. Examining these dynamics through the consideration of multiple perspectives—critical pedagogy and discourse analysis—can provide fresh insights about how much agency teachers and students simultaneously have in a school.

Research Question

The research question in this investigation was: How do beginning teachers and students perceive their places in feedback events and then act on that information during instruction?

A Brief Note on Structure

This paper employs two lenses that are used in separate ways. Critical pedagogy serves as a theory while discourse analysis perspectives are employed as a method or tool in order to analyze the implications of students delivering feedback to teachers in various ways.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005) examines the power dynamics within the practice of teaching. The critical pedagogy lens can also be applied to analyze how power structures are built and then maintained through the act of teaching. Some examples of these structures include how a teacher can assume the role of arbiter during class discussions (i.e., teacher as sole determiner of “truth”) and how a teacher delivers feedback to students (i.e., one-way feedback where the teacher sets parameters for correctness and students must adapt to the teacher's preferences).

To circumvent this dynamic, Freire (2005) argues for dialogue

between teachers and students to create a shared vision of a socially just classroom. However, Gibson (2020) counters that such dialogue on its own can be inherently problematic because there are still issues of power at play even when teachers and students work together to create a shared social vision. Hayes (2014) agrees on the presence of these issues and calls for a recognition and affirmation of challenges faced by marginalized students. Dialogue between teachers and students must purposefully counter those obstacles (Hayes, 2014). Simply put, *students* must be intentionally asked to investigate and question the political discourse and power structures that work to maintain the status quo. When such dialogue is properly implemented, critical pedagogy becomes a transformative one that bridges the theoretical concepts of oppression, liberation, and schooling success for freedom to everyday practice (Hayes, 2014).

Unfortunately for proponents of critical pedagogy, the implementation of said dialogue is difficult because it conflicts with the interests of those who operate in the role of oppressor. In order to engage in meaningful dialogue that promotes social justice, all parties must possess a degree of humility (Freire, 2005). Sinkinson (2020) similarly states the necessity of this humility because dialogue with humility offers “a means to center on learners’ relationship to knowledge, to level learners’ relationship to teachers, and to open learners’ connection to the world” (p. 108).

With that said, Freire (2005) argues such pedagogy cannot be implemented by oppressors because it contradicts their own interest of having students continue in a state of submission. “Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors ... itself maintains and embodies oppression” (Freire, 2005, p. 54). Sinkinson (2020) concurs with the presence of this contradiction and suggests a solution for socially just classrooms under the lens of critical pedagogy can be approached but never fully resolved. Teachers must turn to “critical reflection as a means to reach coherence between ... active participation and ... teacher identity” (Sinkinson, 2020, p. 100).

Methods

There are two main components comprising the methods used in this piece—article selection and an explanation of discourse analysis tenets.

Article Selection

A series of empirical studies was necessary to apply the critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005) and discourse analysis (Gee, 2001) lenses. To find these studies, a systematic process was used that would help explore the research question via a critical, thorough approach (Hannes et al., 2007; Risko et al., 2008). The process began with a series of database searches using combinations of keywords. From there, articles were screened at the abstract level to determine relevancy. Articles deemed to be relevant were then screened at the full-text level and then narrowed down to a set that would be robust enough for the purposes of this paper.

Article Search and Inclusion

Keywords and inclusion criteria were established to determine ten studies that would be suitable for analysis. Searches were performed in three databases (ERIC, Education Full Text, and Professional Development Collection) with the following combinations of search terms and in this order:

- beginning teachers OR new teachers OR novice teachers AND student feedback NOT student teacher (11,406 results, first 300 were screened)

- beginning teachers OR new teachers OR novice teachers AND teacher-student relationship AND student feedback NOT student teacher (2,502 results, first 300 were screened)
- beginning teachers OR new teachers OR novice teachers AND teaching practice NOT student teacher (2,499 results, first 300 were screened)
- new teacher OR beginning teacher OR novice teachers AND student mentor AND student feedback NOT student teacher (18,100 results, first 100 were screened)
- new teacher OR beginning teacher OR novice teachers AND student feedback to teacher (11 results, all screened)

After removing duplicate results, 1,011 articles underwent a multistep screening using systematic parameters (Hannes et al., 2007; Risko et al., 2008). Initially, all 1,011 abstracts were screened applying inclusionary criteria: (a) characterized as empirical research; (b) published in a peer-reviewed journal; (c) published between 2008 and 2021; (d) mentioned the use of documented dialogue between beginning teachers (BTs) and students regarding the practice of teaching; and (e) mentioned the use of reflection from BTs on student feedback about teaching practice. Full-text screening took place as mentioned above until the final set of articles was narrowed to ten.

Discourse Analysis Perspectives

Analysis of the ten articles was informed by discourse analysis perspectives rather than the actual tools of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis entails the learning of new social languages and genres to the point where beginning users learn how to apply these new social languages fluently (Gee, 2001). Some examples of these languages within education are the language of a particular content area (e.g., literary analysis or mathematical proofs) and the language of academic discussions (e.g., saying phrases such as “I agree with...” or “I wish to challenge that premise...” when contributing in class).

In order to arrive at this state of fluency, Gee (2001) provides a distinction between two different levels of discourse: language in general use (discourse with a lowercase “d”) and language reflecting clear ownership or understanding of the context by the user (Discourse with an uppercase “D”). Arriving at Gee’s (2001) big-D Discourse begins with both active and passive consumption of language by the user. This consumption leads to increased recognition of the big-D Discourse, followed by the eventual full application by the user (Gee, 2001).

Finding these sources of discourse and Discourse requires language users to examine a series of particular cultural contexts. Gee (2001) claims cultural models tell people what is typical for social practices, which in turn determine the Discourse of the culture. Brandmayr (2020) agrees with this definition and argues for a related idea where social practices do not develop in complete autonomy. Within the same vein, Anderson and Holloway (2018) apply the notion of cultural models in the field of educational policy. They state educational policy is one such site of motivated meaning and action which lends itself to discursive exploration (Anderson & Holloway, 2018). Brandmayr (2020) further suggests people working in education are not always aware of cultural patterns in educational policy because certain practices are extremely natural and self-evident. Therefore, if cultural patterns are unintentionally disregarded, discourse analysis allows language users to bring those patterns back into their collective consciousness.

One other component closely related to the existence of cultural patterns (but just separate enough to warrant its own designation)



is the examination of the motives behind both the small-d and the big-D discourse. Anderson and Holloway (2018) believe people view discourse not as neutral but rather as motivated by political interests and power dynamics. Tian and Dumlao (2020) make a similar argument but from the learner perspective. They claim students (especially teenagers) move from being passive agents of knowledge to active agents of knowledge once they are able to practice their own analysis of the motives behind why various participants in a culture do what they do—specifically, within a classroom.

Findings

Ten studies were identified for inclusion. During analysis of the ten studies, two categories naturally emerged: (a) feedback about general teaching practices and (b) feedback about more specific classroom management practices.

Feedback About General Teaching Practices

As stated earlier, the features of the critical pedagogy lens include: (a) moments where power structures are examined, questioned, and/or challenged within a classroom, (b) moments where students claim agency in the power dynamics of the classroom, and (c) moments where there is active participation of all parties in dialogue regarding teaching practices.

Six of the ten studies showed explicit focus on general teaching practices. In all six studies, the teachers reported some level of discomfort when confronting the possibility of ceding power to students.

Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008) conducted a case study on a beginning teacher during the first two years of her career. She entered an urban school with highly ambitious ideals about social justice in teaching, but these ideals came off to students in ways the teacher did not realize. While the teacher made every effort to

recognize and avoid situations where she would appear as a “white savior,” she still found it difficult to avoid this pitfall. At one point during her second year, she experienced anxiety when one of her students called her out as trying to be “that White lady from *Dangerous Minds*” (p. 302) who would “come save all of us poor kids in the ghetto” (p. 302). This quote showed a clear challenge to the teacher by framing the situation both in terms of race and popular culture. In other words, the teacher and student engaged in a small-d discourse about how a teacher was performing her job.

The teacher reflected on the implications of this language and recognized a potential way to gain access to the big-D Discourse of teacher-student dynamics in the classroom. This particular example of blunt student feedback prompted a realization that she needed to reevaluate how she viewed education’s ability to shift power to marginalized students. From that point forward, she focused her instruction on how she could shift power less on a global scale and more on a local scale within her own classroom. This change in thinking resulted in a significantly more enjoyable experience for both the students and her. However, fatigue still forced her out of teaching by the end of her second year. In their conclusion, Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008) argued for teachers to engage more in the discourse of student emotions.

Blunt feedback from students was not unique to just that study. Keiler et al. (2020) conducted a case study of several BTs who were given a teaching assistant who sometimes acted as a liaison between teachers and students. The teaching assistants were often the same age or roughly the same age as the students in the class. Keiler et al. (2020) asked the teachers to reflect on feedback provided by the teaching assistants. Hearing back from students entailed an analysis of and reflection on the specific language students used when delivering feedback.

Results showed the teachers trying to come to grips with the level of power students hold when giving feedback. Reactions to feedback included: “I’d say the most important feedback I received was

from the TAs. Because I mean, they're the students, they know what they want to hear" (p. 146), "They're brutally honest" (p. 146), "They speak from the heart" (p. 146), and "That probably hurt a little more! When they told me something obvious that I was doing wrong or wasn't doing well. But again, that's probably most important since they are closest to the students" (p. 147). Keiler et al. (2020) concluded more studies needed to be conducted on the "untapped potential of feedback from students to act as mentors to teachers and thus to shape secondary school teaching" (pp. 149-150). These findings align with Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008) because the teachers and students worked together to gain access to the big-D Discourse of classroom power via the small-d discourse used in written feedback.

An even more painful moment for an instructor happened in a study from Lassila and Uitto (2016). Lassila and Uitto (2016) conducted case studies of several beginning secondary education teachers in Japan and found the teachers struggled to be honest about their challenges and were unwilling to share them with students. This reluctance developed into an inability to be authentic in the classroom, which subsequently affected teaching practices. Feedback from students forced teachers to confront shortcomings, albeit reluctantly. In a similar trend from Chubbuck and Zembylas's (2008) study, the feedback also showed how students sometimes retained considerable power over teachers. After a classroom writing exercise, one teacher remarked:

Usually around 30 of the 39 students in the class returned their diaries to my desk, but one day there were only 10. I started inquiring why this was. I found out that because I had commented on the sloppy presentation of the class president, and that it was not fitting of her status, I had gotten this student mad and she told other students that it was ok not to return the diaries. It was a really big shock that I couldn't communicate with the students, I thought that they didn't want to speak to me. That was the only time when I thought that I wanted to stop being a teacher. (p. 213)

Lassila and Uitto (2016) ended with a suggestion of creating spaces for necessary discursive exchanges between teachers and students regarding teaching practices.

In contrast, some BTs engaged in practices that minimized opportunities for student feedback. For example, Skovholt (2018) analyzed teacher-student feedback encounters (i.e., one-on-one writing conferences) during the writing process and found many teachers delivering feedback in a one-way manner. By not giving students more agency in the writing process after the drafting stage, the teachers essentially promoted their own perspectives with leading questions which imposed their own views on students. Skovholt (2018) suggested teachers could deliver more effective feedback by posing questions less as advice and instead being more direct with negative feedback. Skovholt (2018) also felt teachers should consider relinquishing some control of the feedback process.

Carless (2019) found near-matching results in a study about teacher feedback that occurred during class. Feedback from BTs felt more like monologues and displayed a significantly one-way dynamic. This style of feedback coupled with grades on assignments deeply impacted student emotions and perceptions about feedback in general. Carless (2019) concluded BTs would be better served by viewing students as partners during feedback sessions. Doing so would "play a significant role in enabling appreciation of each other's positions and contributing to the mutual development of feedback literacy" (p. 13).

Both Skovholt (2018) and Carless (2019) suggested the one-way exchanges inhibited students' ability to internalize the language of feedback. Carless (2019) expanded on this idea by arguing students

eventually learn to view the language of feedback as a call to action. However, Carless (2019) also states such understanding requires multiple conversations between teachers and students not just about the content of the feedback but the delivery of it, too.

It should be noted, however, that feedback from students was not always met with teacher anxiety and pain. One study in this category showed an overwhelmingly positive outcome when students wielded agency in giving teachers feedback. Barrera Pérez et al. (2015) analyzed feedback given by students to beginning foreign language teachers. Feedback was requested on various components of a teacher's speaking ability including speed, length, clarity, simplicity, and wordiness. In nearly all cases, feedback was well-received by teachers and subsequently implemented. The process was especially helpful for one teacher as he "learned how to receive feedback from students, which was a difficult but rewarding task, since he was used to giving and not receiving it" (p. 64).

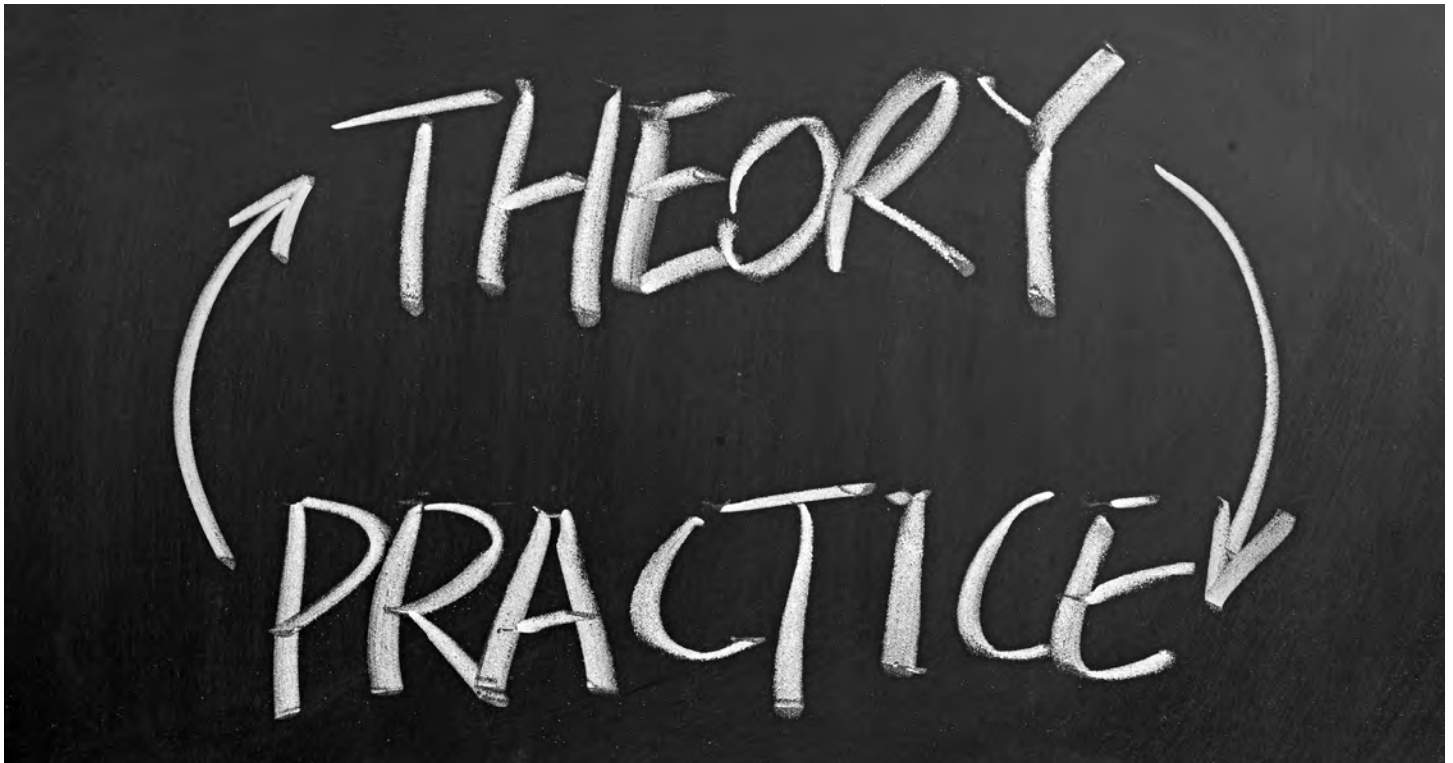
Barrera Pérez et al. (2015) argued their results "might be taken as an invitation for teachers to consider how listening to our students' voice could be the first and maybe the most meaningful resource in order for us to see what our teaching practices are like and what they really need to be like" (p. 65). Their study showed a simultaneous occurrence of small-d and big-D Discourse; whereas, the other studies did not. The teachers and students engaged in small-d discourse about lesson delivery, which propelled all participants to the big-D Discourse of teaching as a craft. While the actual feedback from students was not provided in this particular study, Barrera Pérez et al. (2015) reiterated the highly positive perceptions of the dialogues by teachers and students.

Feedback About Classroom Management Practices

Four of the ten studies showed explicit focus on classroom management practices. In all four studies, the BTs experienced mixed levels of discomfort when confronting the possibility of ceding power to students.

Noel and Shoffner (2019) conducted a study on how three BTs communicated expectations for students in ELA classrooms. All three classrooms displayed a significant amount of two-way dialogue between teachers and students. For example, one student told her teacher that it was hard to tell if the teacher was being serious or funny because of how often the teacher used humor for classroom management. Noel and Shoffner (2019) found some teachers saw a decrease in self-efficacy when they had these conversations with students, but they still made an effort to act on the feedback provided by students. The students in this case study demonstrated a struggle to understand how the teacher was using language. When the teacher used humor, the small-d discourse of classroom management changed because humor often requires an extra veil over the literal meaning of words in order to create a joke. Since the teacher was employing a mix of different small-d discourses simultaneously, the students were unsure about how to access the big-D Discourse of being a member of the classroom.

Strom (2015) also found mixed levels of beginning teacher responses to student feedback. In a case study about beginning science teachers, Strom (2015) found one teacher who struggled considerably with ninth graders but found more success with eleventh and twelfth graders. As the ninth graders developed more resistance to learning, the teacher resorted to more authoritarian tactics to gain control of the room. The ninth graders expressed their frustration because they could not or did not want to engage with language in the preferred method of the teacher. However, the same teacher struck a considerably more two-way dynamic with the older students. The eleventh and twelfth grade students had a better understanding of the type of dialogue in which the teacher wanted to engage. This understanding ultimately led to deeper learning



because of the negotiations that occurred between the teacher and his students. The teacher felt it was possible that the ninth graders were not used to the inquiry-based style of teaching he was using with the eleventh and twelfth graders, which led Strom (2015) to conclude that teaching is a process requiring more attention on instructional growth rather than outcomes.

Strom et al. (2018) conducted a follow-up study with a different set of BTs and also reevaluated the data from Strom's 2015 study. Strom et al. (2018) once again found BTs struggling to establish relationships with difficult students. They suggested these difficulties were a result of students recognizing teacher inadequacies and calling them out, representing a "major paradigm shift away from the teacher as an autonomous decision maker 'in control' of his or her actions and student learning and, instead, moves toward a view of the teacher as just one element in a larger constellation" (Strom et al., 2018, pp. 22-23). On a more positive note, this follow-up study did find that productive dialogues between teachers and students do help students discover their own agency in the classroom.

Pirbhai-Illich and Martin (2020) expressed similar ideas in their case study of teachers who took active steps to invite students into the construction of their own classroom management. One teacher found that "by entering the students' space, you give up some of your dominance and control ... I found this is in fact a form of hospitality, by shifting the circumstances and placing yourself in a position that alters the dynamics" (p. 86). As the teachers recognized how the students owned classroom space, too, their resulting dialogues led to a deeper understanding about the roles of teacher and student. The teachers especially found a deeper understanding about their praxis because they were able to access a big-D Discourse of teacher-student dynamics (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2020).

Discussion

Both the critical pedagogy and discourse analysis lenses can be combined to examine teacher-student exchanges because both lenses focus on power and language. In all ten studies, teachers and students constantly negotiated the dynamics of the classroom via language. What is especially notable about all of these studies is

the BTs did not find much success until they ceded at least some power to the students, which was done via feedback delivery. When students deliver feedback to teachers, usually they are providing an evaluation of what they are gaining from the teacher's instruction and/or are offering an appraisal of how well the teacher is meeting the emotional needs of the learners. These studies show teachers have more success by being more attuned to student emotional and learning needs, which enables the students to recognize their legitimate places as members of the classroom. The students become agents of learning because the teacher has addressed them as human beings.

Something else notable about all of the studies is that they either implied or stated outright the need for more research on the delivery of feedback to teachers by students. Perhaps the manner of this feedback could be given more attention. In some of the studies, feedback was given informally during class discussions (e.g., the *Dangerous Minds* comment). Those studies show meaningful feedback does not need to be delivered strictly through controlled, standardized procedures. If anything, many of the teachers in these studies appeared to express more poignant emotions when they were given spontaneous, informal feedback about their weaknesses. They were not able to prepare themselves mentally for the student comments as opposed to the teachers who administered a feedback mechanism with their own protocols.

In combining the two lenses, it becomes much more apparent on how much power students wield over teachers in just a few sporadic comments. Whether intentional or not, students have the ability to make teachers question their career choices and their motivation for teaching. If students are authentically communicating to teachers that there is value in what they are learning (and the learning is not regurgitated from authoritarian instruction), the teacher is probably more likely to enjoy the profession. That sentiment might not be terribly surprising. It is still important, though, because teachers who feel secure with their career choice are going to be more willing to listen to students when they identify weaknesses from instruction. The teachers can enter into those conversations knowing the students have their best interests at heart. They care about their teachers being both proficient instructors and adults in

whom they want to place their utmost trust. Getting to that point requires deep reflection on power and language in a classroom.

Conclusion

Feedback events provide students with opportunities to wield power within a classroom. Sometimes, these opportunities become scarce if the teacher either actively suppresses these moments or merely does not consider them. However, when students deliver feedback in a variety of ways, the process can foster a greater sense of community among all members of the classroom while providing teachers with meaningful professional development.

It would behoove researchers to conduct more studies on the value of student feedback, including an analysis of how students can act in a *variety of roles* when providing input to teachers. What does feedback look like (and what does it do?) when students are placed in a role that goes beyond the stationary learner who sits in the desk for the entire period and instead, for example, acts as a year-long guide to a BT (Albert et al., 2023)? There are potentially countless pieces of insight that students are waiting to give teachers. Their voices need to be heard far more than they are right now.

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