Purpose of the Introduction in a Dissertation (abbreviated):

Generally speaking, the purpose of introductions in dissertations (at least in the Ed.D. program) is to introduce readers to your topic of research. Part of introducing your topic of research/study includes providing context of yourself as a researcher (your positionality statement and researcher background), including a problem of practice (sometimes referred to as a problem statement or statement of the problem), and your research questions. All of this information is necessary because not only does it provide readers with the background they need to understand your dissertation topic, but it also allows them to know how you as the researcher influenced/impacted the study. As we know, research is not a bias-free endeavor, even if we do our best to make it so. By sharing your own context, you are allowing readers to make their own decisions about how you conducted the study and what informed your design choices (more of this on chapter 3—methodology) in addition to how and why you collected and interpreted the data the way you did (again, we'll talk more specifically about this in the chapter 3 methodology RRG). Thus, chapter 1 heavily emphasizes the rhetorical nature of your dissertation topic.

Potential Writing Moves to Make:

-State why you are interested/invested in the topic under study (including a personal anecdote is an effective way to do this, but not the only way if that's not your style)

-Identify the problem

-Discuss your background as it relates to your reasons for engaging in this research. Also include your knowledge of and experiences with the topic

-Define key terms/concepts

-Provide context (using scholarly sources to support your claims) on the problem(s)

-Use headings and follow typical academic order and presentation of information (strong topic sentences and ideas/content that move from general to specific knowledge)

-Include your research questions

INTRODUCTION

Having worked as a writing tutor for many years in various college-level contexts, and also as a Composition instructor, I have had the experience on more than one occasion, of being involved in conversations with students about vague, nonsensical feedback from instructors and with instructors, the poor writing skills of students in higher education. Students often complain that they cannot interpret their teacher's feedback, or if they are able to understand it, they have a difficult time knowing *how* to make the revision, or for that matter, *why* they need to change things. When talking with instructors about student writing, the conversation usually begins with an instructor, worn down by years of assessing "bad" student writing, saying exasperatedly, "It's just that college kids nowadays can't write." They then begin to assign blame, and some even launch into an extended monologue, or more accurately, a laundry list composed of examples and reasons justifying why students "can't write."

Needless to say, these are not conversations that I enjoy, and they are happening far more frequently than I am comfortable with. Most of the complaints from both students and teachers are legitimate—and as a student, former teacher, writing consultant, and writer—I know that writing, feedback, and revision are important components of the ways in which learning occurs in higher education, which establishes this as a serious pedagogical issue. I am not alone in my perception of the problem. In fact, these concerns have been voiced by many in academia (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Ornella & Treglia, 2008; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1982;

Straub, 1997), yet teachers and students still persist in these frustrating and confusing exchanges in the form of feedback and revision. Since in many instances, feedback is *the* form of writing instruction that students rely on the most when composing and revising, it is imperative that this phenomenon is explored (Ornella & Treglia, 2008).

Researcher Background

My interest in feedback and revision in a higher education context is informed by my personal, academic, and professional experiences. My story of how I came to pursue this topic for my dissertation work is one that involves the highs and lows of my writing life, and how feedback has influenced my relationship with writing. Personally, I consider myself a writer. As soon as I was able to spell, I began writing. I recently found an old notebook—actually my first notebook—and in it I detailed (as much as a first grader could) my daily observations. My writing then contained questions about people and about the world, and I would argue that my writing does that today, with this dissertation being a prime example of my inquisitive disposition. Writing for me then, is so many things, but it is particularly a way through which I form understandings of the world and my experiences in it. It is also through writing that I do my best thinking and communicating. I am a person who is always paying close attention to the words that people use and the way in which they communicate, and so writing affords me the space and the time to express things that matter to me most and in a way that I find more accurate than in everyday conversation. Because writing is often an intensely personal activity to me and because I am highly attuned to the ways in which people communicate, the manner in which people have provided me with feedback on my writing has captured my attention for most of my academic life. […]

In essence, what I hope my narrative has conveyed is that I am passionate about writing and teaching writing, and that I approach the topic of feedback and revision as writing pedagogy with an ethic of the utmost care and a desire to understand these complex processes, and in turn, improve writing pedagogy in a college context.

Formative and Summative Writing Assessment

The terms "formative" and "summative" assessment are used frequently in my dissertation, and so I felt it best to provide a description and discussion of these terms early on so that readers will be properly acquainted with them and their importance to writing pedagogy. In order to understand how writing is assessed, it is important to be familiar with the ways in which writing can be assessed. For assessments to be effective, their intended use should be central to their design, meaning that they should be used the way in which they were designed (Andrade, et. al., 2019). Many kinds of assessment practices are employed when assessing student writing. These practices fall into two categories: formative assessment and summative assessment. While there are many definitions of formative assessment, Andrade et. al. (2019) provide a comprehensive, and modern definition:

> As part of a planned assessment system, formative assessment supports teachers' and students' inferences about strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvements in learning. It is a source of information that educators can use in instructional planning and students can use in deepening their understandings, improving their achievement, taking responsibility for, and self-regulating, their learning. Formative assessment includes both general principles, and discipline-specific elements that comprise the formal and informal materials, collaborative processes, ways of knowing, and habits of mind particular to a content domain. (p. 7)

Commented [KE4]: I point this out to show how I am concluding this section and connecting it back to the research (another writing move you will want to make). We need to make these connections to ensure that the reader doesn't feel like you as the writer went off on a tangent. Your context IS important to your research, and your reader needs to know that it relates and why it's so crucial to your research.

Commented [KE5]: As you may be starting to notice, introductions do not have a "set" formula or certain headings they need to include, so it's your and your adviser's job to figure out what information needs to go in your introduction to give readers context to your study.

In my case, I needed to spend some time discussing formative and summative writing assessment in the U.S., and so I started by defining these terms so that we all (me and readers) were on the same page about the meanings of terms before I just dove into discussing them (this is another writing move that I highly recommend).

Some people choose to include a "definition of terms" section that reads like a dictionary and is comprised of the terms they will frequently use throughout the dissertation. Guided by my adviser and my own experience as a reader, we decided that I would NOT have this section and instead define terms as I used them so that readers would have more than a dictionary definition of the term and thus understand them better.

[…]

A Brief History of Writing Assessment in the United States

While students have been engaging with writing as a part of learning since schools were established, this literature review is mostly concerned with its development during the 20th century and up until the present. As Behizadeh and Engelhard (2011) discovered in their study on the relationship between writing theories and the practice of writing assessment, rarely do either align, and more importantly, writing assessment practices tend to shape writing theories, whereas writing theories have less influence over assessment practices. The nature of this relationship did not bode well for students in terms of their writing development and relationship with writing, because for most of the 20th century, writing was evaluated summatively with a strong focus on "local" errors (grammar, punctuation, and spelling), and little to no opportunity for feedback or revision (Yancey, 1999; Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011; Andrade et. al., 2019). As a result, writing was a highly inauthentic academic practice which bore little resemblance to the kinds of writing students would engage in outside of school, and it was also a confusing one since students oftentimes did not have the opportunity to understand and to learn from their writing mistakes (Yancey, 1999; Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011; Andrade et. al., 2019). Unfortunately, as the saying goes "old habits die hard" and this is especially applicable to the teaching of writing in the United States at every academic level.

[…]

Problem of Practice

My problem of practice primarily investigates three kinds of dissonance regarding writing pedagogy with respect to feedback and revision: (1) the unfulfilled expectations of

faculty that arise as a result of their pedagogical practices, (2) differing perceptions of feedback and revision between students and faculty, and (3) miscommunications between faculty and students. Collectively, these problems largely contribute to the challenges that college students experience when writing and to the belief that their writing skills are sub-par.

Teachers' Writing Pedagogy and Expectations for Student Achievement are Misaligned

College writing feedback and assessment should be of great importance, given that instructors potentially spend "the largest proportion of [their] time" (Sommers, 1982, p. 148) on providing students with writing feedback. Yet, utilizing formative assessment activities and providing quality feedback at the appropriate time during coursework is not standard operating procedure for many college educators (Doe et al., 2013; Dorow et al., 1998; Gruber, 1999; Stonewater, 2002; Szymanski, 2017; Warnock et al., 2017; Zhu, 2004). Instead, they resist formative assessment activities (such as providing multiple opportunities to write and revise based upon feedback) for many reasons, but mostly because of large class sizes and time constraints (Glew et al., 2011; Reardon, 2015; Stellmack et al., 2012; Szymanski, 2017; Zhu, 2004). If college instructors do engage in providing students with feedback, then they normally do so in a manner that is not useful for students and the development of their writing skills, such as limiting opportunities to receive feedback until the assignment is due with no opportunity for revision, or utilizing an automated assessment tool to provide feedback (Glew et al., 2011; Reardon, 2015; Stellmack et al., 2012; Szymanski, 2017; Zhu, 2004). Thus, although many teachers can affirm that they engage in providing feedback to students, their response often proves superficial because they are primarily utilizing this form of pedagogy in a summative fashion, which means that any helpful advice comes too late for it to take root for students' academic and writing development. These kinds of practices are in direct contrast to what is

Commented [KE9]: Here I explicitly call out what I see as the biggest contributors to the overall problem, which in my case is the feedback exchange primarily between instructors and students. Using numbers or letters as a form of breaking the problem down into its components is such a great visual guide for readers in terms of helping them "see" the problem in its complexity and holistically, so this is a writing move I strongly recommend.

Commented [KE10]: My headings are derived from the way I wrote about the contributing factors to the overarching problem (this heading belongs to #1.

Notice that they also appear in the order in which I mentioned them in the preceding paragraph. Staying organized like this will help readers follow along with your discussion. Generally speaking (and as you might already know) the order in which you mention what you will discuss should be discussed in the order that you mentioned it. Like in my example above, I numbered the contributing factors to the problem and that is the order in which I will discuss them in the upcoming paragraphs.

Commented [KE11]: On the sentence level, I would say this highlighted portion does a lot of work.

For one thing, I make a bold claim by saying that feedback and assessment should be of great importance, but I have pretty solid footing to make this claim because I have a quote from an expert on feedback (Sommers) where she states that instructors potentially spend "the largest proportion of their time" on doing so. This is an example of me trying to persuade, or get readers to "buy into" my conception of the problem and how it became a problem.

The next sentence does the work of furthering my point that a problem with feedback exists. With each sentence that follows, I go deeper into the heading—that teachers' writing pedagogy and expectations for student achievement are misaligned. This is what is often meant by having strong topic sentences and moving from the general to the specific.

known about providing more opportunities for writing, feedback, and revision, which, to put it simply, is that these activities are beneficial for students' learning and improvement of their writing. In essence, poor pedagogical practices result in stasis in writing development and reduced opportunities for learning and transfer of knowledge (Hill, 2020; Yancey et al., 2014) in addition to teachers continuously feeling frustrated over the poor quality of their students' work. As a result, both teachers and students are trapped in an ineffective feedback cycle which seemingly cannot be broken.

Teachers and Students Have Different Perceptions of and Goals for Feedback and Revision

Contributing to inadequate writing pedagogical practices are differing perceptions of two collaborative learning activities: feedback and revision. To clarify, students and teachers conceptualize feedback and revision similarly, but they oftentimes have dissimilar perceptions of how to enact them (May et al., 2010; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1980; Sperling & Freedman, 1987; Wallace et al., 1996). Despite the common goal of feedback and revision to improve writing and learning, teachers and students may take what seem like disparate, winding roads to try to achieve this.

In the case of feedback, students and teachers are in agreement that feedback is meant to enhance students' writing development, students' mastery of course content, and to improve the communication of their ideas (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Ornella & Treglia, 2008; Sommers, 1982; Zhu, 2004). However, these common goals become difficult to achieve when students and teachers have differing perceptions of the role of feedback and personalized experiences with feedback, all of which can influence its effectiveness. The types of feedback teachers provide can vary because they have their own purposes that are highly contextualized during feedback scenarios. Likewise, students approach receiving feedback with varying degrees

of experience with and attitudes toward it, in addition to their expectations of how feedback should help them (Agricola et al., , 2020; Bilbro & Clark, 2013; Can & Walker, 2014; Chong, 2018; Dowden et al., 2013; Straub, 2000; Treglia & Treglia, 2009). These different understandings regarding the role of feedback in writing pedagogy and expectations for it leads teachers and students rarely being on the "same page" so to speak.

Students and teachers view revision similarly to feedback in that they believe engaging in revision is meant to enhance students' writing and learning (Anthony et al., 2008; Bleakney & Pittock, 2019; Castello, et al., 2012; Crawford, 1993; Garner & Shank, 2018; Macpherson et al., 2015; May et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 1996). However, in this case, teachers and students often have uncommunicated interpretations and expectations of what it means to revise and what effectively revised work looks like (Anthony et al., 2008; Bleakney, J. & Pittock, 2019; Castello, et al., 2012; Crawford, 1993; Garner & Shank, 2018; Macpherson et al., 2015; May et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 1996). For example, students may choose to revise mostly proofreading-type comments where the changes would be small, quick to make, and do not have much bearing on the content of the writing (Anthony et al., 2008; Crawford, 1993; Wallace et al., 1996) whereas a professor may be expecting them to not only revise those kinds of writing issues, but to place more of their revision efforts on global revisions, or revisions that greatly impact the paper, such as re-organizing the various sections or adding additional content to support one's claim (Garner & Shank, 2018; Sperling & Freedman, 1987). These differing perceptions regarding feedback and revision assist in laying much of the groundwork for the next kind of major miscommunication that teachers and students experience when engaging in formative writing assessment activities, and that is in the interpretation of feedback.

Feedback Often Results in Communication Breakdowns Between Teachers and Students

It has been well-documented in the literature on feedback in the college context that students frequently misunderstand their teachers' feedback on their written assignments (Bilbro & Clark, 2013; Kim, 2004; Prior, 1995; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Sperling & Freedman, 1987; Treglia & Treglia, 2009). Providing effective feedback is a complex, skillful act, and as such, offers many possibilities for unclear communication stemming primarily from vague phrasing and markings (Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Treglia & Treglia, 2009). When teachers provide feedback that is difficult to understand, it further compounds any pre-existing cognitive dissonance between them and their students regarding expectations and perceptions of, feedback and revision. Therefore, it is particularly alarming that one of the main pedagogical forms of writing instruction in higher education—feedback and revision—is rife with such misunderstandings. It is imperative then, that we as writing educators try to do better for our students in terms of their writing and learning development and in service of a very important form of communication—writing. Thus, my research seeks to holistically explore the ways in which teachers and students perceive writing pedagogy, feedback, and revision, and the resources students use when revising in an effort to have an in-depth understanding of the complexities at play in a writing-intensive college course.

Research Questions

1) How do upper-level undergraduate students perceive the role of feedback on their written assignments?

2) How do upper-level undergraduate students apply feedback on their written assignments?

3) What resources do students draw upon while revising written assignments?

4) How does a professor teaching upper-level undergraduate students perceive the role of feedback to students on written assignments?

5) How does a professor provide feedback on written assignments to upper-level undergraduate students?