

# Drawing the line: Views from academic staff and skills advisors on acceptable proofreading with low proficiency writers

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One of many services provided by Academic Language and Learning (ALL) institutions across Australia is allowing students with low levels of written proficiency to forward drafts of assignments prior to submission for formative feedback. The task of the ALL advisor is to suggest how an assignment could be improved, identify common errors, and highlight weaknesses without materially altering the student's work, so that their assignment can receive a "respectful" (Shashok, 2001, p. 4) reading in terms of content from whoever ultimately grades it. Despite reluctance to describe this process as "proofreading", that is often exactly what it is, with the fine line between editorial advice and intervention frequently crossed. This discrepancy between individual proofing practices and the broader anti-proofing ethos of the ALL community can be a source of discomfort, with advisors torn between upholding the "party line" and meeting individual student needs. It is important that proofreading as a type of support is not viewed as heretical, but as a valid pedagogical offering supported by clear institutional agreement on what constitutes acceptable proofreading.

This paper reviews the literature on the ethics and efficacy of both non-directive and directive intervention in student writing. It also reports on a research study where students, ALL- and discipline-based academics reviewed examples of ALL-style commentary on student writing. The study found that proofreading *per se* was not regarded as an unacceptable practice by academic staff or students, though there was divergence on what types of comments were helpful and which were ethically problematic in terms of "voice" and "ownership". The study elucidates correspondences and differences in opinion between academics, ALL advisors, and students on what constitutes unacceptable intervention in the work of low proficiency writers, with the aim of establishing supportive communities of practice around this contentious issue within ALL institutions.

**Key Words:** proofreading, student support, writing support, ethics, intervention, best practice.

## 1. Introduction

Proofreading sits undefined on a continuum between useful and acceptable support and collaboration at one end, and unacceptable intervention and surrender of text authorship on the other (Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2008, p. 65).

The *Little Oxford English Dictionary and Thesaurus* defines proofreading as to “read printed proofs and mark any errors”, a definition oriented towards practices within the publishing industry. The *Macquarie Dictionary* similarly defines proofreading as “to read (printers’ proofs, etc.) in order to detect and mark errors”. Likewise, the Institute of Professional Editors Limited (2017) identifies proofreading as the final prepress stage of a three-level process, preceded by the copyediting stage (“grammar, spelling and consistency”) and earlier editing (“substantive or structural editing, where the editor is involved from the outset, advising writers how they can improve their work”). Within the academic language and learning (ALL) field, proofreading commonly means to materially alter a student’s text or explicitly direct them in altering that text. Given the academic integrity implications of such authorial interventions, many ALL institutions inform students that they do not offer proofreading services. An informal survey of a dozen Australian tertiary institutions’ academic language and learning webpages substantiates this. For example, the University of Adelaide’s Writing Centre states that “staff won’t check your work for grammatical errors ... or edit your work for you” (University of Adelaide, 2016), whilst Australian National University’s Academic Skills and Learning Centre states it is “unable to provide an editing, proofreading or grammar-checking service” (Australian National University, 2016).

While this “no proofreading” mandate is clearly part of the rhetoric of ALL support centres nationwide, academic skills advisors are still frequently asked by students to proofread work. Moreover, based on our experiences as ALL advisors, and as evidenced in conversations with peers at other institutions during and following presentations of this material at several events, academic skills advisors *will* proofread for various reasons, most often due to time constraints and other pressures. Whilst the majority of studies either denounce or advocate proofreading in the broadest sense, no studies have explored the issue in terms of the type of actual feedback comments that an ALL advisor might provide.

This study was undertaken at a private tertiary institution located in Sydney. Its student demographic numbers approximately 900, is largely domestic and predominantly under the age of 25, with a high proportion of students enrolling on a NSW English result of BAND 3, defined as “variable control in using language appropriate to audience, purpose and context” (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2009), and a large number deriving from Sydney’s socio-economically disadvantaged western suburbs. The institution offers degrees in standard disciplines such as business and education, as well as non-traditional areas such as dance, fitness, and coaching. Consequently, many students are kinaesthetically-oriented learners unprepared for the considerable literacy demands of these disciplines, and the number of students with learning and environmental obstacles exceeds the 2015 national average of 16.2% of students coming from low-SES backgrounds (Department of Education & Training, 2016). However, the particular literacy challenges faced – articulating and structuring ideas, grammar and written expression – are not unique to this institution.

The college has its own academic language and learning support centre – unusual for an institution of its size – offering students similar services to equivalent centres across Australia. These include an academic skills component embedded in all foundation units, online resources, “drop in” assessment-specific appearances in other units, and the opportunity for students to attend one-to-one consultations to review drafts of their written work prior to submission. In regard to the latter, depending on the quality of the work and competencies of the student, consultation outcomes will vary. At the non-directive end of the spectrum, dealing with works of reasonable communicative competence, ALL advisors will provide general comments on style and structure, pinpoint recurring grammatical or punctuation issues to address, and point students to further resources to help them develop relevant skills. However, at the more directive end of the spectrum, dealing with student drafts exhibiting poor communicative competence, the work of the ALL advisor is more akin to “fixing” or repairing: the advisor will intervene directly in the text, identifying specific issues requiring remediation and often providing explicit direction and suggestions for alternate phrasing.

The intentions of this paper are threefold. Firstly, it provides an overview of literature on proofreading within the realm of academic language and learning scholarship. Secondly, it reports on the results of a research study that used a selection of proofreading comments and a set of broader

statements on the ethics and efficacy of intervention to gauge opinions on where the line should be drawn in regards to proofreading support. Finally, it encourages other institutions to undertake similar research investigations to help establish a supportive “community of practice” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) around this issue in order to ultimately enable ALL advisors to better meet student needs within this “problematic pedagogical and ethical space” (Turner, 2012, p. 20).

## 2. Literature review

This section will explore two contrasting paradigms that dominate the “familiar and well-worn” (Nordlof, 2014, p. 48) debate over the value and legitimacy of ALL advisors “proofreading” student drafts prior to submission.

### 2.1. The non-directive paradigm

Arguments against proofreading focus primarily on integrity, authorial ownership and the development of student writing competence, and plagiarism as the obvious risks of third party intervention. Proofreading the work of student writers (especially low proficiency or non-English speaking background [NESB] writers) may require the advisor to make such significant corrections of grammar, punctuation, and word choice that ownership of the work is called into question (Harwood et al., 2010). The consequence of proofreading a student draft is that following submission the final reader/marker, unaware of the nature and degree of external intervention in the final version, will award a grade that does not accurately reflect the student writer’s real ability. This lack of transparency is expressed by Scurr (2006), who observed that “proofreading disguises illiteracy, it does not combat it”. The corollary of this is that proofreading is regarded as tantamount to “spoon-feeding”, with the result that student writers become reliant on outside assistance, fail to develop independent writing and self-editing skills, and are lulled into a “false sense of security, since, with proofreaders’ help, they may produce satisfactory coursework, but will be incapable of producing similarly intelligible work under exam conditions” (Harwood et al., 2010, p. 56). A related point is that third party proofreading can delude a student writer into a complacent belief that their writing problems are superficial and easily fixable, hence they are less likely to invest the required effort into dealing with more substantive issues of argumentation, logic, and cohesion.

Another argument for non-intervention relates to the contested nature of what constitutes acceptable proofreading. The term “proofreading” is “used with confusing and contradictory meanings, ranging from polishing or tidying the text to translation” (Scott & Turner, 2008, p. 3). This lack of definitional consensus partially explains why learning centres are reluctant to offer this service. Without agreed guidelines on what is “acceptable”, the provision of proofreading services is fraught with difficulties regarding inconsistency of feedback and a blurring of the line between “surface” and “substantial” corrections, which could result in a plethora of damaging three-way disputes between students, faculty, and ALL advisors. Besides the ethical dilemmas posed by a university-sanctioned proofreading service, a more practical objection is that academic skills centres simply do not have sufficient resources to offer this service to all students.

The “pedagogy of non-intervention” (Clark & Healey, 1998, p. 32) is based on a “process” view of learning wherein learners must be active agents in constructing knowledge and understanding. Proofreading in this context relates to a transmission feedback model that involves “telling” rather than engaging, which “accords learners a lowly status with little volition, limited agency and dependence on teachers” (Boud & Molloy, 2013, p. 703). Underpinning the non-directive approach in the context of student support is a seminal paper by Stephen North (1984) which argued that directive proofreading-type intervention is not a formative, interactive learning process and does not help the student develop their writing skills. North (1984) claimed that the *raison d’être* of a writing centre “is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction ... our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (p. 76). This prescriptive, non-directive concept was endorsed and applied in another influential and oft-quoted text by Brooks (1991) who insisted that advisors should resist the temptation to edit and fix a student’s flawed paper: “The less we do to the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing

centre session is not the paper, but the student” (p. 4). The clear message is that ALL advisors should not devalue their professional role by becoming non-specialist proofreaders, thereby demoting the academic learning centre to a metaphorical launderette where students drop off their texts for dry cleaning.

The orthodoxy of non-intervention outlined by North (1984) and Brooks (1991) coalesced around the ideal of a dialogic, face-to-face collaboration based on the core premise that “the student, not the tutor, should ‘own’ the paper and take full responsibility” (Brooks, 1991, p. 169). Consequently, the ALL advisor’s role is to help the student articulate a thesis and construct a coherent argument without any micro-intervention in their paper. In this scenario, any focus on the text should only involve overall coherence, organisation and “global revisions” (Chromik, 1977, p. 5), rather than sentence-level proofreading.

## **2.2. The directive paradigm**

ALL scholars in favour of more directive intervention take issue with North’s (1984) distinction between “better writers” and “better writing”, arguing that these are not mutually exclusive (Corbett, 2013; Hawthorne, 1999). Directive and non-directive approaches should instead be seen as part of a strategic continuum where, although the long-term goal is to produce independent, effective writers, the immediate, short-term concern of the student (and therefore the advisor) is for concrete support with their paper right now (Clark, 1988; Corbett, 2013). Clark (1988) states

There is no question that the goal of writing centres is to make the students ultimately independent of the assistance of a tutor. But perhaps during the early phases of the learning process, it might be more beneficial for the tutor to assume a more active role. (p. 6)

In this scenario, proofreading is one among a number of legitimate strategies and a more suitable response to student needs than a “blanket” prohibition.

Another strand of the directive paradigm argues that the higher education landscape has been transformed by widening participation, and that rigid, non-directive, “no proofreading” policies are more appropriate for a selective, elitist, homogeneous university system of yore where a basic level of written literacy could be assumed. This Darwinian model focused on selecting and sorting students against pre-set standards, and in this context any individualised help for struggling students was “somehow cheating the objective tests of worthiness” (Blythman & Orr, 2006, p. 4). It is widely accepted that a more flexible, point-of-need alternative to traditional “sink or swim” approaches is required if universities are to transition, retain, and successfully integrate a more diverse student cohort with a different set of cultural, academic, and literacy needs. According to Haggis (2006):

The growing diversity of students means that level and prior experience of learning at the point of entry into higher education can no longer be assumed. Beginning students, at all levels, no longer necessarily ‘know what to do’ in response to conventional assessment tasks, essay criteria, or instructions (p. 522).

In this new higher education landscape, the non-interventionist premise that a guided, Socratic dialogue leads the student to self-discover the required knowledge may not be as effective as a more responsive, pragmatic, hands-on pedagogy (Northedge, 2003). Furthermore, as universities have become more commercially focused and transactional, with ill-prepared students accepted for entry at considerable financial cost to the student, it is, arguably, morally incumbent upon all “service” departments to help students meet the transitional and academic challenges of higher education. The social equity argument is that “proofreading helps lessen the disadvantage experienced by non-natives and writers from less privileged backgrounds” (Harwood et al., 2012, p. 575), thereby promoting inclusion and equity. Furthermore, while students may come to support centres for proofreading assistance, this may just be the “entrée” (Young, 2002, p. 141) and precursor to a longer, more fulfilling collaboration, where “the social nature of directive and emulative tutoring serves to endorse the student’s worth as an emerging professional” (Shamoon & Burns, 1995, p. 145).

As already suggested, proponents of more directive interventions argue that students, particularly low-proficiency ones, do not attain academic literacy by “osmosis” (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012, p. 296). Learning centres play a crucial role in bridging the often unrealistic gap between the writing skills of students and expectations of faculty. Proofreading can also be a developmental, formative experience that aligns with constructivist Vygotskian pedagogy (Clarke, 1988; Nordlof, 2014; Shamon & Burns, 1995) and provides a “scaffolding” to help the novice writer acquire the necessary composition skills (Nordlof, 2014). According to Mackiewicz and Thompson (2013), when dealing with student papers, a writing tutor should provide “motivational scaffolding” through prompts and comments that express praise, empathy and optimism: “Praising students for specific achievements can not only point out behaviours that students should reproduce but also build students’ confidence and self-regulation” (p. 66). Scaffolding can also be cognitive when the advisor uses guided learning strategies such as open questions, hints and simplifying problems (Cromley & Azevedo, 2005). In both cases, the scaffolding provides a frame for appropriate, individualised intervention designed to improve self-regulation and self-efficacy with flow-on benefits for reducing attrition rates and improving retention. Harris (1983) argues that novice writers can benefit from the modelling provided by the proofreader: “What better way is there to convince students that writing is a process that requires effort, thought, time and persistence than to go through all that writing, scratching out, rewriting and revising?” (p. 81). Shamon and Burns (1995) note that in contexts such as music and sport, such directive, appropriative approaches based on imitation, modelling, and emulation are deemed pedagogically sound and ethically acceptable.

The non-directive position that collaborative intervention by the ALL advisor constitutes ipso facto a form of plagiarism has been critiqued by Clark (1988) and Clark and Healey (1986), who argue that this assumption is based in part on an outmoded, romantic notion of writing as a “solitary” pursuit. This outdated position is at variance with postmodern and poststructuralist thinking on textual ownership and the contested concept of plagiarism (Pennycook, 1996). Moreover, in response to concerns about proofreading by ALL advisors being a form of cheating, it has been argued that access to novice students’ writing can, on the contrary, help to identify, prevent, and remediate intentional or inadvertent plagiarism, as the advisor can provide direct “show and tell” support with paraphrasing and referencing skills. Proofreading as part of a collaborative process can reveal gaps and weaknesses in the writer’s grammar and syntax, and offer “teachable moments” and learning opportunities that provide valuable individualised feedback. Moreover, Seedhouse (2006) has remarked on the double standard evident in the acceptance of collaboration and proofreading for doctoral theses and simultaneous denial of this same service for low-proficiency international and domestic students.

Despite the oppositional nature of the debate regarding the ethics and efficacy of proofreading, there is agreement in the literature on the lack of any institutional framework or prescriptive guidelines on acceptable practice (Harwood et al., 2010). The recurring media stories about plagiarism, cheating, and the profusion of web-based proofreading and essays-on-demand services attest that the need for a “workable heuristic” (Harwood et al., 2010, p. 66) remains pertinent. However, any attempt to establish consistency in practice and consensus on acceptable intervention must begin by involving students, faculty, and ALL advisors in an open negotiation to find common ground on the type of intervention that would be both helpful and ethical.

### 3. Methodology

To gather student and academic views on what constitutes acceptable and/or unacceptable proofreading, two surveys were developed.

#### 3.1. Survey A

This survey presented 10 sample proofing comments on grammar, written expression, punctuation, and referencing. The 10 comments provided were designed to showcase various levels of intervention (see Table 1) and participants were asked to rank these comments on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 labelled “Not enough” and 5 labelled “Too much”. “Not enough” would be chosen if a comment was unclear, evasive, unhelpful, heavy on prohibitive technical or grammatical jargon,

or provided insufficient direction to the student. At the opposite end, “Too much” could be selected where a comment was too directive and interventionist, usurping the voice of the original writer and wresting authorship away from the student. Between these two extreme poles, the middle of the scale, 3, was labelled “Just right” for instances where the comment provided sufficient detail and support for the student without exerting or seizing authorial control.

Handouts were distributed in person to on-campus students, ALL advisors and discipline-based academics at our institution, whilst online students at our institution and ALL colleagues outside our college were invited via email to participate using Survey Monkey.

The survey was completed by 59 students: 34 during class-time and 25 electronically. The students surveyed during class were first-year students enrolled in the college’s compulsory foundation unit. Participants were briefed by the researchers in their tutorials and completed the survey in paper form. Whilst all enrolled in the same unit, the students were studying a range of degrees across different disciplines, and some were regular users of ALL services while others were not. Consequently, this pool of participants constituted a representative sample of the student body at our institution. Students surveyed electronically included current online students in, and past participants of, this foundation unit, and were likewise drawn from different degrees and disciplines. These students were canvassed and briefed via a general email request, and completed their survey via Survey Monkey.

In addition, 30 academics were also surveyed: 24 employees of our college (5 ALL specialists and 19 discipline-based academics from fields including health, dance, business, coaching, and education), and 6 working in other ALL institutions who were acquainted with the researchers. The former were surveyed during a staff meeting where they were briefed by the researchers beforehand and completed surveys in paper form. Those academics located elsewhere were approached and briefed via email, then completed surveys via Survey Monkey.

The purpose of surveying both students and academics was to identify how both cohorts felt about the comments provided, to gauge similarities and differences in how they view ALL-style feedback, and to pinpoint which types of feedback are perceived as acceptable and/or unacceptable to both cohorts, in the interest of developing a mutually beneficial set of good practice principles for feedback provision. The purpose of consulting external ALL academics in addition to internal ones was to ensure the dominant perspectives of discipline-based academics were reasonably balanced with perspectives from ALL specialists. Consequently, an imbalanced ratio of 5 in-house ALL specialists to 19 discipline-based academics evolved into a more respectable 11:19 ratio once external ALL perspectives were incorporated.

### **3.2. Survey B**

The second survey was specifically tailored to academic staff and was completed by the same 30 academics surveyed above, simultaneous with Survey A and under the same briefing and delivery conditions. In this survey, academics were presented with 10 statements about the nature and philosophy of ALL feedback, its function and scope, and what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable methods of feedback (see Table 2). Rather than selecting a number on a scale, for this survey, participants were presented with three categories to choose from for each comment: “Agree”, “Disagree”, and “Unsure”. Once again, the statements provided were designed to present a variety of potential attitudes, philosophies, and approaches towards feedback, with several crafted to be particularly provocative.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Survey A**

Table 1 presents the data from Survey A, which collected student and staff impressions on a variety of proofing comments. Each row contains a proofing comment – some generic, others interventionist – followed by the breakdown of student and staff responses to that comment (by percentage) in each of the ranking categories, ranging from “Not enough” to “Too much”.

The responses in Table 1 indicate that students are generally favourable towards all types of comments, whether they are directive or non-directive. Comment 5, which is perhaps the most directive as it provides sample phrasing for an essay introduction, only attracted a combined total of 23.7% of votes across columns 5 and 4 (“Too much” and borderline), with almost two thirds (62.7%) regarding it as “Just right”. A similarly directive rephrasing in Comment 9 proved even more popular with students at 67.8%. Conversely, non-directive comments such as 4 and 8, which simply indicate a problem without providing sufficient detail about how to repair it, were poorly regarded and attracted the highest percentage of votes across columns 1 and 2 (“Not enough” and borderline) at 47.5% and 44.1% respectively. Meanwhile, comments that attracted the most “Just right” votes from students were seemingly straightforward, mechanical proofing comments, such as identifying a missing period (Comment 1: 83.1%), a missing comma (Comment 6: also 83.1%), and the need for an ampersand (Comment 10: 88.1%). This suggests that students, while generally favourable towards any and all support, clearly prefer comments providing specific instruction and are less enamoured with those that simply highlight but do not address an issue.

**Table 1.** Results of Survey A. (Student  $n = 59$ . Staff  $n = 30$ .)

Proofing Comments		1. Not enough (%)	2. (%)	3. Just right (%)	4. (%)	5. Too much (%)
1. <i>Run on sentence - full stop here, new sentence.</i>	Student	1.7	10.2	83.1	3.4	1.7
	Staff	10.0	20.0	50.0	16.7	3.3
2. <i>Your topic sentence suggests you will talk about extreme weather but then the paragraph is mainly about air temperature. Make sure your topic sentence matches your paragraph content.</i>	Student	1.7	11.9	76.3	10.2	0.0
	Staff	0.0	3.3	83.3	13.3	0.0
3. <i>Perhaps use a different connecting word to highlight the differences; for example, “whereas” or “on the other hand”.</i>	Student	1.7	13.6	67.8	13.6	3.4
	Staff	0.0	3.3	76.7	20.0	0.0
4. <i>This sentence is not grammatical.</i>	Student	15.3	32.2	39.0	11.9	1.7
	Staff	46.7	36.7	16.7	0.0	0.0
5. <i>Your introduction should finish with an outline, e.g. “This analysis will look at the air temperature and extreme weather events in more detail, and then examine how these determinants...”</i>	Student	1.7	11.9	62.7	20.3	3.4
	Staff	0.0	3.3	23.3	46.7	26.7
6. <i>Comma after introductory phrases e.g. Similarly, However, Furthermore.</i>	Student	0.0	5.1	83.1	10.2	1.7
	Staff	3.3	3.3	86.7	6.7	0.0
7. <i>Affect (affect = verb; effect = noun).</i>	Student	5.1	20.3	66.1	8.5	0.0
	Staff	3.3	13.3	70.0	10.0	3.3
8. <i>This doesn't make sense – read it aloud and you will hear what I mean. Can you re-write it?</i>	Student	15.3	28.8	49.2	5.1	1.7
	Staff	10.0	33.3	53.3	3.3	0.0
9. <i>This is confusing. Do you mean, “...affected by prolonged high temperatures because fewer people participate...”?</i>	Student	5.1	11.9	67.8	11.9	3.4
	Staff	0.0	6.7	36.7	43.3	13.3
10. <i>Ampersand needed between two authors inside brackets i.e. (Stewart &amp; Smith, 2014).</i>	Student	1.7	5.1	88.1	3.4	1.7
	Staff	3.3	0.0	80.0	16.7	0.0

While the majority of students surveyed found most proofing comments were “Just right” (with the exception of the non-specific comments 4 and 8), both discipline and ALL-based academics were more discerning in what they deemed acceptable or unacceptable proofing through their

rankings on the Likert scale. Nonetheless, in most cases the voting patterns of the academics aligned closely with the students in terms of identifying comments which were acceptable (“Just right”) or unacceptable (“Too much” or “Not enough”). Like students, the most votes in the “Just right” category were for comments providing generic proofing instruction, such as Comment 6 which identified a missing comma (86.7%) and Comment 10 regarding an absent ampersand (80%), but also Comment 2 which pointed out the need for a clearer topic sentence (83.3%) and Comment 3 which suggests using a different linking word (76.7%). These comments also fall into the generic proofing category, providing clear, mechanical, and non-interventionist instruction. Meanwhile, just as students were lukewarm on non-directive comments that highlighted issues but did not provide any guidance or instruction, the highest percentage of combined staff votes across columns 1 (“Not enough”) and 2 (borderline) were for Comments 4 and 8 at 83.4% and 43.3% of the votes respectively. Finally, in combined votes across columns 5 (“Too much”) and 4 (borderline), academics likewise showed solidarity with students in deeming Comment 5, which provides sample text for an essay’s introduction, the most unacceptable in terms of being overly interventionist and directive (73.4%). This was closely followed by Comment 9, which could be deemed directive insofar as it provided alternative phrasing for an unclear sentence. In marked contrast to 67.8% of the student respondents, only 36.7% of academic respondents found this comment “Just right”.

#### 4.2. Survey B

The results of the second survey are presented in Table 2. In this survey, academics (both discipline- and ALL-based) indicated their agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty about statements regarding ALL advisor-type work and the provision of feedback to students.

**Table 2.** Results of Survey B, completed by the same 30 staff who completed Survey A.

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)
1. Directive intervention in a student’s draft impacts fair and accurate grading by the academic because it creates a false impression of the writer’s ability.	43.3	30	26.7
2. Any intervention in a pre-submission draft should be acknowledged (e.g. “This essay was reviewed by the Student Learning Services ...”) so that the academic is aware that help was provided.	53.4	23.3	23.3
3. The level of “directiveness” of feedback should vary depending on the student’s writing level.	73.3	20	6.7
4. It is acceptable to “fix” students’ pre-submission work for “surface” errors (i.e. grammar, punctuation, spelling).	36.7	53.3	10
5. It is acceptable to make suggestions and offer choices for alternative words and phrases.	66.7	10	23.3
6. It is acceptable for ALL staff to rewrite a sentence or passage in a student’s draft to demonstrate good writing.	33.3	43.4	23.3
7. Errors “stigmatize” writers, so proofreading that corrects errors before submission gives the writer a “fair hearing” by the academic grading the paper.	30	23.3	46.7
8. Direct intervention and error correction by ALL staff can provide a “model” for students to imitate, thereby developing their proficiency.	53.3	20	26.7
9. Errors should be highlighted in a draft but never fixed.	53.3	43.3	3.4
10. The degree of intervention in a student’s draft depends on the language and literacy ability of the student and their stage of education (e.g. 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year).	76.7	13.3	10



The results of this second, academics-only survey substantiate the findings of Survey A, and as above the attitudes of academics towards proofreading were more nuanced and provisional than the attitudes expressed by students. According to Table 2, the majority of participants concurred with the statements that the degree of intervention in student work should vary depending on each student's language and literacy capabilities (Statement 10) and that the directiveness of feedback should similarly vary in accordance with their abilities (Statement 3): both assertions amassed the highest percentages of "Agree" votes from participants (76.7% and 73.3% respectively). The statement that attracted the highest percentage of disagreement, meanwhile, was Statement 4, which asserted that it is acceptable for ALL staff to fix surface errors in a student's work prior to formal submission: 53.3% of staff disagreed (though 36.7% did not take issue). Meanwhile, the most polarising statement, and the second most-disagreeable one, was Statement 9, which asserted that errors should be highlighted but never fixed: 53.3% of staff agreed with this creed, whilst 43.3% disagreed, deeming it acceptable to both highlight and fix errors. Finally, the statement with the highest percentage of "Unsure" votes – and thus the statement that most staff were ambivalent about – was Statement 7, that proofreading prior to submission enables student assessments to receive a fair hearing from markers free of stigmatisation due to errors: 46.7% of staff registered their uncertainty with this claim. In fairness, such a statement is subject to variables in regard to assessment type, assessed skills, topic area, marking criteria, and other factors.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this small-scale research study suggest that students and academics do not necessarily regard proofreading as unacceptable per se. The academic responses in the survey suggest a more pragmatic attitude to pre-submission proofing of student assignments, which may indicate an acknowledgement that the literacy needs of many students entering tertiary institutions require more directive "hands-on" interventions. The willingness on the part of academic staff to consider proofreading as an acceptable practice has been identified in an earlier study by Turner (2011, p. 428), who found that "Sometimes the demand for proofreading from academic writing advisory services did not come from students, but from staff". As noted earlier, for a relatively small private tertiary institution with a vocational orientation, the college where this study was largely conducted is unusual in having a dedicated academic support service. As Salem (2014) commented in his analysis of the American education scene, "Writing centres may be amply represented in the most powerful sectors of the higher education landscape, but ... are largely absent from the lower-tier institutions whose students could benefit from academic support and advocacy" (p. 37). In this environment, where many students are disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital, writing proficiency, and general level of preparedness, academic staff may be prepared to accommodate a more "hands on" directive approach to the transition, retention and attrition challenges posed by students who are failing assignments because of literacy issues. The survey results suggest that academic staff and ALL advisors are cognizant of the need to engage with the reality of an "increasing demand for and dependency on proofreading as a form of support" (Harwood et al., 2010, p. 65).

More broadly, a willingness to countenance a directive form of intervention particularly for students with low levels of writing proficiency may also evince a "loss of faith" in the efficacy of the constructivist paradigm by which students "discover" the rules and schema underpinning academic writing. In this regard, it is worth highlighting parallels between arguments over the benefits and shortcomings of directive and non-directive proofreading and the issues raised in the long-running debate over the relative merits of *direct instruction* versus *discovery learning* (Clark, Kirschner, & Sweller, 2012; Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Lee & Anderson, 2012; Mayer, 2004). It is germane to this discussion that Clark et al.'s (2012) review of the empirical evidence regarding these instructional approaches concluded that a direct instruction approach is more effective, especially with novice learners, and that "when dealing with novel information, learners should be *explicitly shown all relevant information, including what to do and how to do it*" (p. 12, emphasis ours), while minimal guidance techniques should be confined to only "the most expert learners". This differentiation in approach was supported by the academic respondents who endorsed the view that the level of intervention in a draft should be differentiated according to the proficiency of the student (see Table 2: Statements 3 & 10). Consequently, when

reviewing a novice learner's draft, it may be more helpful for the ALL advisor to return the text to the student in the form of a proofread, "worked example" (see Huang & Reiser, 2012; van Gog, Kester & Paas, 2004) where the level of proofing is detailed and all changes made are explained clearly to the student. However, the draft of a more skilled expert writer may only require colour-coded highlights indicating areas that need reviewing. The benefits of using "worked examples" have been shown in subjects such as algebra (Zhu & Simon, 1987) and early science instruction (Klahr & Nigam, 2004), both of which accommodate step-by-step exemplification. Further research into the use of "worked example" theory in the complex, multi-variate area of low-proficiency writing may be fruitful.

However, the responses to the survey suggest that despite a more pragmatic attitude to proofreading, there is still significant confusion and dissent over what level of proofreading is unacceptable. Participants were in the main supportive of ALL staff addressing surface errors in student work – for instance, identifying missing or incorrect punctuation and signalling its correct placement (Table 1: Comments 1 & 6) – with broad approval from academic staff and students for comments that provided clear, generic proofing instruction. However, it is noteworthy that the most disagreed-with and most polarising statements in Survey B both contained the word "fix" in them (Table 2: Statements 4 & 9). Somewhat paradoxically, the academic respondents took issue with the term "fix", but in Survey A responded favourably to what could be deemed instances of "fixing" surface errors of punctuation and spelling (Statements 1, 3, 6, 7, & 10). Clearly, the words "fix" and "fixing" carry negative connotations of intervention and wresting authorship away from the student, even when this is not especially the case. This is similar to the stigma attached to the term and concept of "proofreading" – as discussed in the literature review – as a form of negative practice. Like "fix", "proofreading" is a fluid and flexible word that can ultimately encapsulate a range of activities: from simply pinpointing a grammatical or punctuation issue in a student's work, to changing it on the student's behalf with accompanying instruction, to more significant acts of textual revision. This speaks to the need for clarity in defining the exact parameters of proofreading at an institutional level, and these parameters may vary from institution to institution.

There was also a difference in perspective between students and academics on where the line should be drawn in terms of unacceptable intervention. For example, most academics (83.4%) felt the comment, "This sentence is not grammatical", was "Not enough" or borderline, compared to just under half (47.5%) of students, who nonetheless constituted the majority vote in that category (Table 1: Comment 4). Meanwhile, nearly three quarters of academics felt the comment providing sample introductory text for the student (Table 1: Comment 5) wrestled authorial control away from the student, with 73.4% deeming this comment "Too much" or borderline, compared to 23.7% of students (whilst 62.7% deemed it "Just right"). Consequently, it is evident that academics showed strong disfavour towards comments that either indicated but did not explain a writing issue or that furnished students with useable ready-made text to the detriment of their learning experience. In contrast, students, while recognising the shortcomings of these approaches, nonetheless found them more acceptable.

This result is of interest considering the academics' widespread acceptance that the amount of feedback given per student cannot be consistent, but must fluctuate in volume and specificity in accordance to their learning needs (Table 2: Statements 3 & 10). Discipline-based and ALL academics are thus open to the provision of greater levels of support – and by implication the explicit identification of surface errors and explicit direction – on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, the high percentage of academics voicing uncertainty as to whether error elimination means they will be less likely to stigmatise students (46.7%), compared to those who outrightly agreed (30%) or disagreed (23.3%) (Table 2: Statement 7), implies that a significant proportion of academics would entertain this notion and, by extrapolation, potentially support instances of interventionist proofreading that reduce errors to create a cleaner, more streamlined reading experience.

### **5.1. Key findings of study**

In summary, based on the survey results discussed above, it is possible to deduce the following. Firstly, in principle many discipline- and ALL-based academics are broadly supportive of generic

proofreading, contrary to popular rhetoric that suggests otherwise. Secondly, academics and students commonly concur on what constitutes appropriate feedback for students, though when percentages are compared, the proportion of staff opposed to certain approaches tends to be higher. Thirdly, academics mostly agree that comments signalling the presence of an issue but not elaborating on it are insufficient. Fourthly, and expectedly, academics are reluctant for ALL staff to provide written examples of text for students. Finally, academics found statements containing the word “fix” to be most contentious, suggesting that the line between acceptable and unacceptable intervention may be a matter of phrasing, with instances of fixing happily approved but the word “fixing” generating consternation elsewhere. Ultimately, the key messages to be extracted are that generic types of proofreading are deemed acceptable by both academics and students; feedback that is explicit about the nature of and solution to a problem is preferred, and only when the line is crossed to providing new or alternative text on the student’s behalf does this intervention become unacceptable.

## **5.2. Limitations of study**

Whilst the study surveyed ALL academics both within and outside our institution, the students and discipline-based academics surveyed were limited to our institution. Moreover, as indicated earlier, 25 of the 59 student participants (42.4%) were surveyed electronically, whilst 6 of the 30 academic participants (20%), namely those based at other ALL institutions, were likewise surveyed online. Results have not been differentiated based on whether participants were responding electronically or in person, nor have they been differentiated based on whether academic participants were discipline- or ALL-based, or whether those ALL advisors were employed at or external to our organisation. Such differentiation may prove insightful, but is outside the scope of this study.

## **5.3. Key outcomes of this study**

Prior to this research study, ALL advisors within our institution were ambivalent about the extent to which they could “proofread” a student’s draft assessment, given the dominant anti-proofing discourse within the ALL community. Our review of the literature on this topic has helped to affirm that there is precedent and justification for this type of support in particular cases, and that dialogue around this issue should not be carried out in hushed tones but in a collegial atmosphere. Exploring the issue with the key parties has helped to develop a more informed and supportive community of practice, consistent with Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) definition of such communities as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4).

In addition to the precedent established via the literature review, the results of our surveys confirmed that the attitudes of students, discipline-based academics and ALL advisors towards proofing-style feedback are not radically divergent. This has likewise been affirming, and while we are yet to formally institutionalise guidelines for incumbent or incoming ALL advisors around proofreading, in our daily practice we are now more comfortable providing proofing-style feedback and are generally more responsive to students requiring hands-on, interventionist support. The “worked example” approach discussed by Huang and Reiser (2012) and van Gog et al. (2004) has served as a valuable instructional model for this type of support.

However, while this practice has been broadly affirmed by the survey participants, the reservations articulated by respondents around comments deemed too interventionist and statements deemed particularly contentious have also been noted. Consequently, while we strive for explicitness and thoroughness in identifying the nature of and solution to problems, and are more hands-on in accordance with the year level and development of the students, the line continues to be drawn at providing new or alternative text on the student’s behalf, except in the most extreme of cases.

## 6. Conclusion

Two factors motivated this study: the first was a professional interest in exploring the mismatch between the non-directive, no-proofreading “pedagogy *du jour*” (Corbett, 2013, p. 85) espoused by the majority of university support centres, and demands from students with low levels of writing proficiency seeking more directive intervention and literacy support to help them succeed and “find their feet” in the crucial transition to tertiary education. The other motivation was to open an institution-wide debate about where the line should be drawn between helpful assistance and ethically questionable collaboration, in order to provide “clarity and support for all parties involved in/affected by the process” (Harwood et al., 2010, p. 65). The findings discussed above have proven beneficial for developing parameters and frameworks for formative feedback provision at our institution.

However, the outcomes discussed above will not necessarily be applicable or sustainable across all institutions, given variations in institution size, student numbers, staffing capacities and workloads, and curricular foci. Consequently, we recommend that other ALL offices undertake their own investigations and engage relevant stakeholders in reviewing their institution’s position on proofreading, in order to evaluate if it can be a useful, acceptable, and feasible element in supporting students with low proficiency writing. As this paper has established, there is precedent and justification for proofing-style feedback, and benefits to be reaped from having this dialogue to remove stigma, to better support students in need of greater intervention, to establish a set of shared parameters and principles (whether formalised or informal), and build consensus and a supportive community of practice around this topic, both at an individual institutional level and within the wider ALL community.

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