

---

5-20-2023

## Inconsistencies and Values as Signs of Paradigmatic Change: Researchers' Language in Research Articles on Feedback

Stefan Sellbjer

Linnéuniversitetet, stefan.sellbjer@lnu.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Sellbjer, S. (2023). Inconsistencies and Values as Signs of Paradigmatic Change: Researchers' Language in Research Articles on Feedback. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(5), 1535-1547. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.3587>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## Inconsistencies and Values as Signs of Paradigmatic Change: Researchers' Language in Research Articles on Feedback

### Abstract

The aim is to contribute to scientific research development in the field of feedback. More specifically, the purpose is to illustrate how researchers, even though they are devoted to the constructivist model, still use expressions with their roots in the transfer model, and to demonstrate researchers' use of value statements in favor of the constructivist model thus distancing themselves from the transfer model. The examples are taken from research articles on feedback mainly focusing on higher education. The empirical material is analysed using concept analysis. The result is discussed in relation to theories of metaphors and folk-theories as well as to a more general trend in favor of formative assessment.

### Keywords

paradigm, transfer, constructivism, feedback, theory of science, concept analysis

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

# **Inconsistencies and Values as Signs of Paradigmatic Change: Researchers' Language in Research Articles on Feedback**

Stefan Sellbjer

Department of Pedagogic, Linnaeus University, Sweden

---

The aim is to contribute to scientific research development in the field of feedback. More specifically, the purpose is to illustrate how researchers, even though they are devoted to the constructivist model, still use expressions with their roots in the transfer model, and to demonstrate researchers' use of value statements in favor of the constructivist model thus distancing themselves from the transfer model. The examples are taken from research articles on feedback mainly focusing on higher education. The empirical material is analysed using concept analysis. The result is discussed in relation to theories of metaphors and folk-theories as well as to a more general trend in favor of formative assessment.

*Keywords:* paradigm, transfer, constructivism, feedback, theory of science, concept analysis

---

## **Introduction**

In the discussion of feedback in learning settings, there has been a shift from a traditional perspective to variants of constructivism. This may be exemplified by Walker (2009), who advocates a constructivist perspective. Tutors should give feedback, she argues, helping the student to take steps from “transmission mode” statements as regards errors made, to comments helping the student to reconstruct her knowledge, skill or understanding and thus approaching what is expected. Another example is Black and Williams (2009), who aim to develop a theory of formative assessment with its theoretical base in Piaget and Vygotsky. By challenging students to reflect on their own thinking and by creating arrangements enabling students to learn through dialogue, cognitive growth is assumed. In the following two models, “Model of transfer” and “Model of constructivist,” are outlined and contrasted against each other regarding their paradigmatic starting points, theories of language and perspectives on learning. With the models outlined, a more precise aim will be formulated and discussed based on excerpts from journal articles on feedback, mainly focusing on higher education.

The case of a student misinterpreting and failing to fully decode feedback comments is familiar (Handley & Williams, 2011; Nicol, 2010; Walker, 2009) and seems logical in advocating a constructionist perspective with its roots in a hermeneutic paradigm, since a basic assumption is that man does not read the world but interprets the same. Walker (2009) argues that, despite the shift in higher education towards a constructive perspective regarding the understanding of learning, comments on assignments have not undergone the same shift and, one might wonder, nor in the language used in scientific articles discussing feedback.

Laudan (1977) argues that conceptual problems of the most vivid type arise when a theory is logically inconsistent and thereby self-contradictory. To increase conceptual clarity through careful clarification of meaning is one of the most important steps for achieving scientific progress. Thus, researchers may believe they are investigating the same thing, but partly investigate different things. This article is an attempt to contribute to scientific research development in the field of feedback, by clarifying the use of concepts with their roots in

different perspectives through concept analysis. Could it be that authors of articles on feedback use formulations with residence in a traditional perspective even though they advocate a constructivist perspective?

### **Theory of Science**

To understand the shift from a traditional perspective to constructivism we have to start in the theory of science. According to Kuhn (1970), scientists working within a specific paradigm agree about the existence of a network of, e.g., conceptual and instrumental commitments to science, and of the choice of theoretical framework and methodological considerations. Anomalies, i.e., facts or findings that contradict the established paradigm, occur successively in a paradigm. Periods where agreement prevails around the network of conceptual, theoretical, and methodological assumptions could be referred to as illustrating “normal science.” “Revolutionary science” represents a short period of chaos where these commitments are jettisoned and replaced, and after a while a new paradigm is established. During the period of transition there will be an overlap between problems possible to investigate either by the new and the old paradigm. Kuhn (1970) also claimed that the paradigms are incommensurable, which makes it impossible to compare them with each other, since there is no common basis to start from. “...when the normal-scientific tradition changes, the scientist’s perception of his environment must be re-educated ... After he has done so the word of his research will seem, here and there, incommensurable with the one he had inhabited before” (p. 112). According to Newton-Smith (1981) this is one reason why every initial choice between paradigms only can be justified by value arguments, even if the proceeding scientific work carried out within the framework of a certain paradigm, is based on rational choices.

Lakatos (1970) replaces paradigms by “research programs,” which also involve a succession of theories. A common hard core of commitments links theories to each other, and a good progressive theory can be verified experimentally and lead to new predictions. It also explains data that brought the established paradigm into question. Lakatos (1970) tells us that several research programmes can exist simultaneously and that rival programmes can even contribute to one another. Laudan (1977) uses the term “research tradition” arguing that each tradition exhibits certain methodological and ontological commitments which keep them apart. They tell us, for example, which methods are appropriate, and which are not.

In accordance with Kuhn (1970) there is an overlap between the new and the old paradigm. If there has been a paradigm shift in research on feedback from a traditional perspective to variants of constructivism, then it may be traced in how researchers in the field work out their texts. Firstly, are they still using expressions in their research articles that are reminiscent of a past paradigm? Secondly, referring to the support of Newton Smith, do researchers mark their residence in the new paradigm with value statements?

### **Paradigms and Theories of Language**

In this section the “Model of transfer” and “Model of constructivist” are briefly described, and the differences clarified largely by accentuating what are the distinctive issues. They are accordingly inevitably simplified and idealized. The models also occur elsewhere in numerous variants, none of which are likely to be described the same way as in this article. Even if one or another formulation differs it does not, however, change the picture painted later in the article. For a more elaborated presentation, see Hughes and Sharrock (1997) and Sayer (1992).

The Model of transfer is based on a logical positivist paradigm, The external world is under ideal circumstances accessible to human beings “that reality consist in what is available

to the senses” (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997, p. 28). When we observe something in the external world, it is thus somehow mirrored in our consciousness, and can be apprehended unchanged by our senses. Impressions and our mental state thus coincide. Central to logical positivism is that scientific knowledge is derived from experience. According to the verification principle, meaningful statements must be empirically verifiable and thus possible to confirm by some form of observation. As for scientific work, true scientific knowledge corresponding to the external state of things can in principle be produced. Preconditions for this include that the researcher is very rigorous and experienced.

Language, both in its spoken and written forms, is central to human activity, and particularly to the discussion of feedback. The Coding Theory (Fiske, 1998) is a theory of communication that can be combined with the assumption of strict positivism. A source or sender, e.g., a teacher, transmits information, such as feedback, through a communication channel, i.e., a physical medium. The student receives feedback and makes an interpretation of it. If she does not understand the information, she continues to ask questions until she fully understands what is said. The communication is, however, almost always disturbed by “noise.” In connection with feedback, noise can be someone else talking, a mobile phone which intermittently calls for attention or anything else that distorts the sender’s message. Lillis and Turner (2001) trace a similar view of communication back to Locke and Descartes, according to whom what was clearly seen had to be clearly expressed. Knowledge is thereby conveyable through the medium of language.

Ramsden (2003) comments on lecturers in a higher education setting understanding learning and assessment as a linear sequence, in accordance with the theory of communication just described. Teachers thereby tell information, and assessment clarifies the students on how well they have absorbed data. “What could be simpler?” Ramsden asks himself rhetorically. The main point is that it is possible for the student to understand exactly what the teacher says if ideal circumstances for communication prevail. It is hence possible to transfer information between people.

The brief description of the “model of transfer” provides a tool for the following analysis. The “model of constructivism” provides another tool. In a hermeneutic paradigm with roots in Kant’s distinction between “things-in-themselves” and “things-as-they-appear,” as well as in the theories of Heidegger and Gadamer, the external world is not accessible to man as it is. Our first contact with the external world is based on sensory impressions, which, so to speak, stands between the “real” world and our perception of the same. However not even the sensory impressions are perceived directly but are affected by a filter of some kind. There are many ideas of what precisely these filters consist of but simply expressed, one can imagine that people of different sex, age, experience, skills, and socio-cultural background interpret sensory impressions somewhat differently. The baggage of experience, which is partially unique to everyone, constitutes the pre-understanding through which all impressions are sorted. These conditions also apply to the researcher who, however careful and experienced, produce scientific knowledge from different perspectives and theories.

A model of communication inspired from semiotics (Fiske, 1998) can be combined with a hermeneutic paradigm. In this model, signs such as spoken messages, texts, images, gestures, and eye movements are central. Signs usually originate from an individual who intends to express a certain thought. However, a sign, for example written feedback, represents only part of what the individual expresses. What the teacher thinks is thus only partly materialized in words written. The student who perceives the feedback creates a meaning from the words. The different ways in which the authors of the text express themselves and the students understand the message have to do with their pre-understanding or have, in other words, passed through their filters. Both have, accordingly, a rucksack of past life experience that influences the way they design and read messages. People who have lived under similar

conditions understand each other better, as the meaning of their signs is more similar. Still, no overall and complete understanding is possible since everyone is different in some respect. Feedback is thereby always more or less partly misunderstood. It represents a meeting between individuals, partly captured in a semi-private perspective, rather than some form of rational transmission of information.

Ramsden (2003) also comments on models of assessment in a higher education setting which are more compatible with the hermeneutic paradigm. Assessment is, he argues, an uncertain human process, where teachers tend to make fallible judgements. Linell (2009) asserts that speech in a dialogical counter theory “completes” thoughts and that readers “fill in” the meanings of written texts. The speaker’s goals are often vague and partly ambiguous and subject to change during delivery. Words have no unique fixed meaning; they are rather partly open “meaning potentials.” Furthermore, the process of verbalization transforms the perceived subject matter involving a communicative and cultural construction of content.

### **Traditional and Constructive Perspectives**

Within education, there has been a strong movement away from a traditional perspective, often with reference to behaviourism. The perspective can be understood in many ways, but the basic idea can be summarized as being about “transfer”; the teacher knows something which can ideally be transferred to the student (Olson & Bruner, 1996; Phillips & Soltis, 2009). A traditional perspective is often more or less linked to strict positivism and is also based on the assumption that information can be transferred between people (Sellbjer, 2002).

The traditional perspective has been replaced by different versions of constructivism with roots in a hermeneutic paradigm. As regards research on feedback, the shift from a traditional perspective to variants of constructivism was exemplified in the introduction by Black and Williams (2009), Higgins et al. (2002), and Walker (2009). Individual constructivism where the teacher is expected to challenge students’ thinking has gradually given way to social constructivism and socio-cultural perspectives. The focus of knowledge formation has thus shifted from the individual to more of a dialogue between individuals in a linguistic, cultural, social context, inspired by the ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin.

In the following, a strict positivist paradigm, the coding theory and a traditional perspective will be referred to as “the transfer model,” while a hermeneutic paradigm, the semiotic model of communication and a constructivist perspective will be termed “the constructionist model.”

### **Aim**

The aim of this study is to contribute to scientific research development in the field of feedback in a higher education setting. More specific, focus is on formulations in scientific articles illustrating the overlap between the transfer and constructivist model.

### **Method**

The interest in the subject of this article is about raising the awareness of the difficulties arising from, as a researcher, being in the crossroad of different paradigms. Being on the road often means to recognize what you have left and what you have accepted, which is part of what it means to be wiser, in this case as a researcher. This influences how researchers choose to formulate themselves, which they are not always aware of. This study is explorative in the meaning that it examines an area where few studies and hypothesis exist (Patton, 1990) and

because it paves the way for other studies by clarifying how researchers use concepts central to the presentation.

More specific the empirical material was analysed using concept analysis, a technique to handle and clarify concepts (Wilson, 1963). What is interesting, according to the author, is not to find “the” meaning of words, because words do not have only one meaning, but to be concerned with possible and actual use of the words. Machado and Silva (2007) argue that theoretical and conceptual analysis has to do with the activities researchers engage in evaluating the language of science, for example, to assess the obscurity or clarity of scientific concepts, or the inconsistency or consistency of a set of statements, and to scrutinize laws and chains of inferences and arguments. The main advantage of the method is, affirms Walker and Avant (2002), that it renders very precise operational as well as theoretical definitions to be applied to theory and research. Dennis (2003) has taken the point of departure in Wilson’s (1963) conceptual analysis exploring the concept of peer support within a health care context. In the analysis, a description of the literature is presented, followed by an enhanced discussion of the consequences and, at the end, related concepts are offered.

Wilson’s (1963) classical concept analysis consists of 11 steps is in this study modified to include five steps, sufficient for the purpose of the study:

1. Determine the purpose of the analysis.
2. Select concepts/examples.
3. Identify all uses of the concept possible to discover.
4. Determine the defining attributes.
5. Identify model cases.

The process was abductive, that is, as a movement back and forth between theory and the empirical material and it is where understanding gradually emerged. This means that the five steps, and especially the first two, have emerged in interaction with the empirical material and based on my preunderstanding, previously presented as the transfer and constructivist model.

Regarding the third step, a total of 40 articles, some of which are taken from anthologies, were read. In connection with exploring the research state of art regarding feedback, particularly in higher education, I also became aware that there quite often occur formulations in one and the same article that be taken to support the supposition of an overlap between the transfer and constructivist model. All such formulations were marked and later noted in a list. About 15 of articles contained such questionable formulations. The articles were published during the period of 2000-2015. An even more narrow reading could have led to more cases being noticed. Fifteen cases are still enough to confirm the supposition, especially since the most important researchers in the field of feedback in higher education are included in this study. If they express themselves ambiguously, it can be assumed that other researchers do the same.

Questionable formulations were sorted into two categories based on a conceptually clustered matrix, which according to Miles and Huberman (1994), consists of rows and columns arranged to bring together items that “belong together,” based on the researchers a priori ideas of items relating to an overarching theme and from the same theory. Starting from my preunderstanding and because of interaction with data, the material in the fourth and fifth steps was thereby grouped into two categories. The empirical material was analysed based on the description of the transfer and constructivist model, as well as of related theories of perspectives and of communication, as described above.

To the first category inconsistencies was attributed, that is, where an author claims two contradictory or incompatible matters (Backman et al., 2012). For example, Handley and

Williams (2011) state, with reference to Nicol (2010), that that conditions are met “*unless* students understand the assessment criteria for their work ... they cannot *fully interpret and ‘decode’* ... the feedback” (p. 96). Further, at the end of the article, they emphasize the importance of tutors to “interpret the criteria and standards in a consistent way, resulting in the *same judgment* about the quality of students’ work” (p. 105; italicized text added in this added in this and the following examples).

The second category has to do with lack of objectivity. Wilson (1963) speaks of the confusion between fact and value and argues that it is extremely easy to unconsciously introduce an implication of value into statements. Backman et al. (2012) describe the method as finding hidden or explicit evaluating arguments that are not directly related to what is in focus. For example, Tang and Harrison (2011), distinguishes between a more *traditional* and *conservative* tutor perception of language learning, teaching, and feedback on assessment, where *errors should be corrected*, and pinpoint a more *humanistic* view, in which *good points should be highlighted*. The traditional tutor thus denotes something conservative, and implicitly, not humanistic. Here, errors are corrected, while the modern tutor points to ‘good’ points instead.

The next section gives an elaborated interpretation of similar examples regarding the two categories. Since the material for the empirical study consist of already published articles, written by researchers who can be expected to know that a critical examination is part of scientific practice, no specific measures have been taken to protect privacy and confidentiality.

## Result

In the following, several examples are given of how researchers, although seemingly preferring the constructivist model, still use formulations which evoke the transfer model, the coding theory. The first section shows examples where author’s claims two contradictory or incompatible matters. In the next part, examples are given where the author’s expresses normative statements.

Hattie and Timberley (2007), with reference to Sadler, state that feedback must contain information related to ...“the task or process of learning that *fills a gap* between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood” (p. 82) while Boud (2000) claims, also with reference to Sadler, that “[t]he only way to tell if learning results from feedback is for students to make some kind of response to *complete the feedback loop*” (p 158). Price et al. (2010) argues: “Where the gap relates to the curriculum content, the feedback *may be able to specify* the knowledge that needs to be understood” (p. 278). Consequently, If information from one part fills a gap or completes a feedback loop, there is no longer any difference between what the sender intends and what the recipient understands. The formulation “may not” also invites the interpretation that knowledge is specifiable. The quotes, thus, suggest that information, in accordance with the coding theory, can be transported from tutors to students, if the ideal There also appear quotes like: “Within the feedback process, clarity of purpose *must be shared by all parties* to enable evaluation to be useful” (Price et al., 2010, p. 278). “Tutors’ intentions when providing feedback *may not* be accurately perceived and acted on by students” (Orsmond & Merry, 2011 p. 125) and “... if the learners have *appropriate knowledge* of results showing how much progress they have made and pointing out specific areas in which additional work is needed” (Astin, 2012, p. 197). In a hermeneutic paradigm such sameness does not exist since all tutors and students understand feed-back somewhat differently based on their pre-understanding.

The power of dialogue has received more focus in recent research, which may be seen as an expression of individual constructivism gradually giving way to social constructivism and socio-cultural perspectives. The problem of misunderstanding feedback could thereby be



solved by engaging tutors and students in dialogue (Handley & Williams, 2011; Higgins et al., 2002). Although the reasonable conclusion is that researchers have diverged even further from the transfer model, the notion of the possibility to achieve mutual understanding seems to persist.

Nicol (2010) argues that dissatisfaction with feedback could be understood as a symptom of a fractured and impoverished dialogue. Price et al. (2010) pinpoints the relationship between assessor and student as the heart of successful feedback processes and call for a dialogue “in order to *share understandings* of the purposes of feedback” (p. 288). Orsmond and Merry (2011), who also advocate the benefits of feedback dialogue, recommend that tutors discuss with their students “their intentions as to the purpose of their feedback so endeavouring to reach *common understandings*” (p. 135).

The way I understand the authors is that if the dialogue between teacher-student or student-student is developed and refined enough, they will reach a shared understanding. This means that the barrier between “things-in-themselves” and “things-as-they-appear,” as stated by Kant, and the basic assumptions of hermeneutics are exceeded. A related problem is how such a common understanding can be verified. Reasonably, a third party is needed, a kind of “God’s Eye,” with the ability to investigate the minds of those involved in the dialogue to determine whether the parties have arrived at the same understanding of a certain phenomenon.

In sum: As scientists we make certain choices, and once these are made there is no going back. As soon as we have taken the step into a hermeneutically interpreted world, we no longer can “fill” gaps or achieve a “common” understanding, whether we lean more towards individual or towards social constructivism.

### **Summative and Formative Feedback**

In this section, several examples are presented regarding researchers’ use of value statements in favour of the constructivist model, thus distancing themselves from the transfer model. The examples are taken from research articles discussing summative and formative feedback and are based on concept analysis, where hidden or explicit evaluating arguments are in focus.

Black and McCormick (2010) discuss the dominance of summative assessment in higher education, which, at the expense of a formative approach, “hovers over all attempts to enrich ... learning” (p. 498). The authors also seem to connect summative assessments with a cognitive view of learning, where learning takes place “in the head,” in contrast to a socio-cultural view, with reference to Wenger.

The benefits of formative assessment in providing tutors with ways of checking students’ constructions are highlighted by Higgins et al. (2002), with reference to Biggs. Formative assessment is, as claimed by the authors, now referring to Hyland, an instrument for developing each student’s learning. Ivanič et al. (2000), in a study of tutors’ responses to students’ writing, claim in the conclusion that some responses give the impression of containing both incorrect and correct answers and that such comments convey an objective view of knowledge. The authors continue: “Comments can reveal beliefs about the relative value of knowledge and wisdom: whether the work of academics is to create and reproduce a body of knowledge and information, or to analyse and discuss issues with wisdom and understanding. Most of the detailed responses in our sample value wisdom and understanding rather than knowledge...” (p. 62). Responses can, according to the authors, “convey ideological messages about the extent to which the institution is monolithically authoritative or open to diversity and change” (p. 63).

A more extreme position is taken by Boud (2000), who distinguishes between assessment as certification (summative assessment) and as adding learning (formative

assessment). The former is, according to the author, exercised by the guardians of kinds of knowledge (e.g., teachers) and provides a mechanism of control over students as well as novices and junior employees. It provides authoritative statements of “what counts” but, ironically, it drives out learning and undermines students’ confidence. The author advocates, not surprisingly, formative assessment and asks for a revolution in the field towards sustainable assessment. He observes that we are all products of pre-revolutionary times and declares that students must become effective self-assessors. Anything less will make them dangerously ill prepared to cope with change.

Words and expressions used in the résumés and citations above can be linked to summative and formative feedback. Words and expressions recognized as related to summative feedback are, for example, “control,” “traditional,” “conservative,” “undermines students confidence,” “authority/authoritative statements/monolithically authoritative,” and “hovers over all attempts to enrich learning/drives out learning.” Words and expressions appearing in connection with formative feedback are “develops learning,” “students as effective self-assessors,” “humanistic view,” and “wisdom and understanding.” The selection of examples is of course not representative of all research on feedback. Nevertheless, it still shows a trend or pattern that is worth paying attention to and discussing; the authors use value statements for what should be perceived as wrong and out of time and right and in time.

## **Discussion**

How could then the results of this investigation be explained? The answer is complicated and can be approached from many points of view, some of which are briefly discussed in the following. Starting with the first part of the result, why do researchers use expressions in their research articles that are reminiscent of a past paradigm?

A first explanation can be found in theories of metaphors. Lakoff (1987) argues that objectivist metaphysics and epistemology, which share fundamental characteristics with the transfer model, are essentially at the core of much of our common-sense understanding of the world. It consists of a world view consisting especially of rationality, thought and language. The author argues that such metaphysical assumptions most often seem natural and inescapable.

An often-used tool of reasoning is the use of metaphors, and they also play an important role in the development of science (Indurkha, 2007). According to the author, metaphorical reasoning is characterized by involving two distinct domains: first the source of the metaphor and, secondly, the target of the metaphor. In similarity-based metaphors there is some likeness noted between the target and the source from which further similarities are stipulated. Similarities could even be created by the metaphor. Lakoff (1987) claims that metaphors extremely often use image schemas as their input. They are also extraordinarily productive but also dangerous in that they bias our thoughts without our realizing it. A metaphoric understanding is at hand even if an expression does not have that meaning. It is thereby, claims Lakoff (1987), easier to use, learn and remember words within an existing pattern, domiciled in an already-known metaphor. One of the most widely spread models is the container metaphor (Bereiter, 2002) where consciousness is equated with a container or as a “mental document cabinet.”

The Coding Theory can be understood as an image schema, with boxes containing source, communication channel and receiver, and can thus be combined with the notion of resembling consciousness with a container. Scientists working in the field of feedback, who have probably used the Coding Theory previously, would in accordance with the above reasoning still be influenced by this. The metaphor has marked them so deeply that they use

words and expressions that are reminiscent of a past paradigm unconsciously. The Coding Theory is the source of the metaphor, and the semiotic model of communication is the target.

A second explanation related to the first has to do with researchers, who, like people in general, possess several beliefs that unconsciously determine how they perceive the world. Bereiter (2002) speaks of folk theories, theories picked up from popular culture used in our daily effort to make sense of actions and events. Lakoff (1987) talks of expert theories and folk theories within the fields of categorization, language, politics, medicine, and physics. Whether it is an expert or folk theory, it involves some kind of idealized cognitive model as well as the corresponding vocabulary. People may also hold several expert theories and folk theories in the same field.

Kahneman (2011) describes how a self-reinforcing and associatively coherent pattern of emotional, cognitive, and physical responses suddenly emerge beyond our control. Thinking is, accordingly, partly silent and hidden from our conscious self. Within pedagogy, both Bruner (1996) and Olson and Bruner (1996) have strongly advocated folk theories of psychology and pedagogy. Folk psychology reflects ingrained cultural beliefs about the mind, things which are rarely made explicit, and which control our ordinary interactions. Folk pedagogy has to do with how to help other people to learn.

I would argue that the case is the same regarding the understanding of language and the transfer of knowledge. When I say something to you, I will be lulled into the belief that you understand what I am saying. Your face and your way of answering confirm that you understand what I mean. It is, accordingly, not easy for researchers always to watch their steps to prevent our common-sense understanding from consciously affecting how we think and write. A related problem is that these concepts we use, partly unconsciously, steer our thinking in certain directions.

Third, changes take a long time, not least of something as complicated as taking the step from one paradigm to another. Using myself as an example, I am still receiving new insights into the consequences of a hermeneutic paradigm for knowledge formation, even though this has been one of my special interests for decades. Fourth, when we researchers produce articles, we necessarily refer backwards to articles written perhaps 20-30 years ago. The authors of these refer in turn to even older articles. This means that the older the articles are, the greater the probability that they were written entirely or partly within the transfer model. Here the problem arises how to make references correctly without appearing to support basic assumptions that we do not share.

Lastly, the result can be interpreted as evidence that Lakatos' (1970) theory that several research programmes can exist simultaneously is applicable. Against this, it can be argued that Laudan's (1977) term "research tradition," which exhibits certain methodological and ontological commitments, distinguishing them from each other, is more applicable. The use of words with roots in the transfer model can thus rather be understood because of mistakes.

### **Formative and Summative Assessment**

The second part of the result demonstrates researcher's use of value statements favouring the constructivist model. As apparent from Table 1, summative feedback, on the one hand, should be avoided, as it is bad and belongs to a bygone era. It is about control, a conservative and traditional concept that hovers over every attempt to enrich learning. It also borrows traits from the transfer model, although with the addition of several strong normative judgments. Formative feedback, on the other hand, represents the good and is poised for a bright future. It is about dialogue, wisdom, sustainability, humanism and adding and shares characteristics with the constructionist model. In the discussion of feedback, researchers not only use arguments based on facts but also mix them with value assessments. The result is in

line with Newton-Smith's (1981) theory that every choice between paradigms must be justified by value arguments.

**Table 1**  
*Summative and formative feedback*

<b>The bad ones - summative feedback</b>	<b>The good ones – formative feedback</b>
Authority/authoritative statements/ monolithically authoritative	Dialogue
Hovers over all attempts to enrich learning/ drives out learning	Checking students' constructions
Cognitive view of learning 'in the head'	Develops learning
Certification	Positive difference
Control	Adding
Undermines confidence	Sustainable
Traditional	Effective self-assessors
Conservative	Humanistic view
Correction/incorrect correct answers	Good points highlighted
Objective view	Analyse and discuss
Reproduces a body of knowledge	Wisdom and understanding
	Diversity and change

Suppose that a teacher gives a lecture in the form of one-way communication, standing behind the pulpit. A researcher observing the event may be misled into believing that the teacher's actions are based on a traditional perspective. It may, on the contrary, occur that the teacher understands knowledge formation as interplay between individual and social constructivism and that, consequently, transfer of knowledge is impossible. The teacher may hence assume that the content of the lecture is indeed understood slightly differently by each of the students, but that it is still an effective way to introduce an area of knowledge. The lecture may then be followed by tasks addressed in a dialogic context that challenge the students.

In the context of feedback, the same mishmash can occur if researchers misunderstand or over-interpret the connection between summative feedback and a traditional perspective as well as that between formative feedback and variants of constructivism. Such a mistake can be due to their having received the impression of a more general trend in favour of formative assessment. For example, leading scientists like Wiliam and Leuhy (2015) claim that formative assessment is the only option, as students do not always learn what we teach, while it is our duty to find out what they have learned before we try to teach them something new. Didau (2015) argues that formative assessment is so widespread that it is hard to ignore our prejudices and give us a clear picture of how useful the concept really is.

Is it then wrong to strive for more of formative feedback? Of course, not unless it becomes too categorical. Depending on the context, it may be warranted to choose either summative or formative feedback. It has to do with the kind of knowledge involved. If a student is supposed to learn to enumerate and name rivers, cities, countries, and other factual knowledge, she needs summative comments about what is right and wrong or about what she has understood or misunderstood. To make comments like “with regard to your learning of rivers in France, you should continue to think about ...” is meaningless. Even in learning a more complicated theory, such as Piaget’s Theory of Development, the student needs summative feedback concerning what she has understood so far. This is true regardless of the perspective the teacher is committed to. For researchers to interpret all such comments as belonging to the transfer model is thus misleading.

In this perspective, Ivanič et al. (2000) distinction between knowledge and wisdom/understanding becomes somewhat strange. The authors seem to argue for less monolithically authoritativeness and greater openness to diversity and change supporting an ideology of pluralism. Not the least, the concept of knowledge is questioned. However, even adherents of such a position may need to provide students with summative comments showing how much they have understood, for example, of a hermeneutic or postmodern theory or, in other words, what knowledge about the field they have achieved so far.

The situation is the same regarding formative feedback. Even teachers who are devout followers of a traditional perspective can give formative comments to facilitate what they regard as transfer. Knowing something which in the ideal case can be transferred to the student, the teacher takes various measures to get students to share this understanding. This may involve placing students in dialogue with others and getting them to search for information with the constant objective of making them understand exactly what the teacher knows.

Lastly, the argument in this article is based on interpretations of exemplars from articles, sometimes as little as single words. This way of lifting anything out of context always has its risks, of course, not least in cases where a scientist is searching for trends and patterns. In addition, language and word usage are treacherous matters, as the same word, not least in English, has several meanings. Despite these objections, I argue that the examples are so numerous and so obvious that researchers should pay more attention to their basic assumptions as well as to the use of value statements when formulating reports.

### **Further Research**

Using concept analysis has its limitations. One difficulty is that only the clear examples appear. In a text mass of several hundred pages, there are thus several cases that have not been noticed. Another complication is that the text extracts are taken out of context, which complicates the judgement whether the interpretations are reasonable.

The term “feedback,” as well as its semantic associates “feed-up” and “feed-forward” confuses and leads the thought in the direction of the transfer model. One way to deal with this may be to divide the concept into what is related to assessment, i.e., whether the student has met the requirements for a particular task or not, as against issues that have to do with how to produce a better answer or a more qualified text. Feedback could thus be replaced by something else, probably by something that might be found in the theories of hermeneutics, semiotics, and constructivism.

## References

- Astin, A. (2012). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Backman, Y., Gardelli, T., Gardelli, V., & Persson, A. (2012). *Vetenskapliga tankeverktyg*. Studentlitteratur.
- Bereiter, C. (2002). *Education and mind in the knowledge age*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Black, P., & McCormick, R. (2010). Reflections and new directions. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 493-499.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D., (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5-31.
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), 151-167.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Harvard University Press.
- Dennis, C.-L. (2003). Peer support within a health care context: A concept analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 40, 321-332.
- Didau, D. (2015). *What if everything you knew about education was wrong?* Crown House Publishing.
- Fiske, J. (1998). *Kommunikationsteorier: En introduktion*. Wahlström & Widstrand.
- Handley, K., & Williams, L. (2011). From copying to learning: Using exemplars to engage students with assessment criteria and feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(1), 95-108.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.
- Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Skelton, A. (2002). The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(1), 53-64.
- Hughes, A. J., & Wesley, W. S. (1997). *The philosophy of social research*. Longman.
- Indurkha, B. (2007). Rationality and reasoning with metaphors. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 25, 16-36.
- Ivanič, R., Romy, C., & Rimmeshaw, R. (2000). What am I supposed to make of this? The messages conveyed to students by tutors' written comments. In M. Lea & B. Stierer (Eds.), *Student writing in higher education* (p. 47-65). Open University Press.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Penguin Books.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire and dangerous things. What categories reveal about the mind*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakatos, I. (1970). Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes. In I. Lakatos & A. Musgrave (Eds.), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965* (pp. 91-196). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139171434.009
- Laudan, L. (1977). *Progress and its problems: Towards a theory of scientific growth*. University of California Press.
- Lillis, T., & Turner, J. (2001). Student writing in higher education: Contemporary confusion, traditional concerns. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(1), 57-68.
- Linell, P. (2009). *Rethinking language, mind, and world dialogically*. IAP-Information Age Publishing.
- Machado, A., & Silvia, F. (2007). Toward a richer view of the scientific method: The role of conceptual analysis. *American Psychologist*, 62, 671-681.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis. An expanded sourcebook*.

- SAGE Publications.
- Newton-Smith, W. H. (1981). *The rationality of science*. Routledge.
- Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501-517.
- Olson, D., & Bruner, J. (1996). Folk psychology and folk pedagogy. In D. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.). *The handbook of education and human development* (pp. 9–27). Blackwell.
- Orsmond, P., & Merry, S. (2011). Feedback alignment: Effective and ineffective links between tutors' and student's understanding of coursework feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36, 125-136.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Phillips, D. C & J. Soltis (2004). *Perspectives on Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Price, M., Handley, K., Millar, J., & O'Donovan, B. (2010). Feedback: All effort, but what is the effect? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 277-289.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education*. Routledge Falmer.
- Sayer, A. (1992). *Method in social science. A realist approach*. Routledge.
- Sellbjer, S. (2002). *Real konstruktivism. Ett försök till syntes av två dominerande perspektiv på undervisning och lärande*. Växjö Universitet.
- Tang, J., & Harrison, C. (2011). Investigating university tutor perceptions of assessment feedback: Three types of tutor beliefs. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(5), 583-604.
- Walker, M. (2009). An investigation into written comments on assignments: Do students find them usable? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 67-78.
- Walker, L. O., & Avant, K. C. (2011). *Strategies for theory construction in nursing*. Prentice Hall.
- William, D., & Leahy S. (2015). *Handbok i formativ bedömning*. Natur & Kultur.
- Wilson, J. (1963). *Thinking with concepts*. Cambridge University Press.

### Author Note

Stefan Sellbjer is an Associate Professor in Pedagogic in the Department of Pedagogic at Linnaeus University, Sweden. Please direct correspondence to Stefan.Sellbjer@lnu.se.

Copyright 2023: Stefan Sellbjer and Nova Southeastern University.

### Article Citation

Sellbjer, S. (2023). Inconsistencies and values as signs of paradigmatic change: Researchers' language in research articles on feedback. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(5), 1535-1547. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.3587>

---