



December 2022

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Recommended Citation

Lacy, Sarah M. (2022) "Feedback Conversations: An Activity to Initiate Instructor-Student Dialogues about Writing Development," *Journal of Response to Writing*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol8/iss2/6>

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Feedback Conversations: An Activity to Initiate Instructor-Student Dialogues about Writing Development

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Brian Huot who encouraged me to write about this activity, and Dr. Jennifer Cunningham for offering me advice on an early draft.



Feedback Conversations: An Activity to Initiate Instructor-Student Dialogues About Writing Development

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Abstract: In this teaching article I discuss the pedagogical implications of a classroom activity in which students work reflectively with instructor feedback that has been provided to their writing. Using the “comments” feature in Google Docs, instructors create a dialogue with students through “feedback conversations,” in which feedback is the exigence for collaboration in developing a student’s writing process. This activity addresses the work of Edgington (2020) and Gay (1998) by offering an exercise that allows instructors to remain reflective on their feedback practices while also instigating a “conversation” between instructor and student. By offering a virtual space to house this conversational exercise, instructors provide students a chance to take autonomy in their own learning and writing development. Feedback conversations give students a direct say in the development of their process, ensuring that the instructor is not the only voice being afforded credence in how students are to use feedback to develop their writing process.

Keywords: feedback, teacher response, metacognition, reflective pedagogy, student-centered

Author Note

I would like to thank Dr. Brian Huot for encouraging me to write about this activity and Dr. Jennifer Cunningham for offering me advice on an early draft.

A common issue cited by many college writing instructors is the uncertainty that students are reading and engaging with the feedback they provide to their writing (Cunningham, 2019; Lafen & Smith, 2017). As writing instructors, we dedicate time to reading the work of our students, responding in ways that we hope will allow them to further engage with their own writing process and develop their identity as a writer (Ferris, 1997; McBeth, 2015). While the exact goal of teacher feedback is dependent upon an instructor's individual pedagogy (Furman, 2019), it is reasonable to assume that each instructor wants students to read their comments before revising a draft or writing a future essay. But what can be done if students are not reading this feedback? How can an instructor ensure that students are engaging with their comments? And more importantly, how can an instructor confirm that when the students do read their feedback, they understand what the instructor is saying or asking of them?

Edgington (2020) stated that because the “majority of our classroom writing tends to be in the form of comments to students, we must take the time to reflect on written responses” if we wish to improve our responding and teaching practices (p. 153). There are several ways that instructors may use introspective activities to improve their responses. I propose that the best activities also offer students a voice in the process and a chance to reflect on their own writing development. This teaching article outlines an activity I call “feedback conversations” (FCs), in which students respond directly to the feedback I provide to their writing by answering a series of reflective questions, to which I then respond. Generated through shared Google Docs, these ongoing conversations are individually catered to the students' own needs by utilizing the “comments” feature of this virtual platform. I first developed this activity to verify that students were working through my feedback; however, what grew from these sessions was the opportunity to observe how students actually interpreted my written feedback. In the semesters since, implementing this activity has influenced the evolution of my feedback practices—I now go beyond

a one-sided response to student writing by asking students to comment back. This request provides students a direct role in the feedback portion of the writing classroom.

Writing Pedagogy and FCs

Rodway (2017) stated that reflective writing pedagogy must include “a dialogic and collaborative feedback process” that will “enable students to become reflective, independent learners” (p. 75). FCs provide students such a space to reflect on how they receive instructor feedback and how they may use the comments in the development of their writing process. In this way, FCs engage students in metacognition, which is a common goal of a college writing course (Cohn & Stewart, 2016). Metacognition and reflection are closely connected (Alt & Raichel, 2020) because the goal of such an educational model is to teach students how to think critically about their learning process and adapt their skills as needed.

Writing research has established that instructors play an important role in students’ ability to reflect on how they learn (Sommers, 2011). Barnes (2020) argued that providing guidance as students write reflectively can increase students’ feeling of autonomy in their achievements in writing while allowing instructors insight into the effectiveness of their pedagogical choices. Additionally, Cohn and Stewart (2016) suggested that responding directly to students’ reflective writing is necessary for students to understand the purpose in developing their capacity to reflect on their learning process. Cohn and Stewart argued that students will need clear direction from instructors regarding the intended outcomes of the assignment to actually practice metacognition in their reflective writing.

In order for an activity such as FCs to be successfully integrated into a writing course, it is important to not only recognize the metacognitive work being asked of students but also consider the overall approach to teaching that is necessary to help students feel confident and supported. FCs are inherently student centered: the activity was developed in part to provide a space for students to seek clarification of the feedback

I provided and for me to learn how students read and conceive of the comments. Considering students as an active part of the learning process is an important quality of student-centered pedagogy as it pushes back on a teacher-centered approach in which knowledge is viewed as something held only by the instructor (Kain, 2003). According to Stewart (2019), a student-centered learning environment “assume[s] learning is a result of dialogue and reflection,” a process in which instructors relinquish some control in how and when lessons are conducted (p. 47).

Implementing FCs

A goal of the college writing class is to impart writing lessons that students will use in their future courses and professions (Driscoll & Powell, 2016). Structuring writing activities to engage students in metacognition provides an optimal environment for them to personally connect to the lessons of the class. To implement a student-centered pedagogy that emphasizes the importance of reflective writing, I developed the FC activity, recognizing that in order for students to utilize my feedback to advance their writing development, they may need support to understand my comments. In this way, FCs operate in a similar manner to writing conferences. Conferences offer instructors a way to individualize writing lessons based on the needs of each student by emphasizing the importance of asking questions that will start a discussion. Myroup (2020) suggested that for a writing conference to be effective in aiding students’ learning, their work must be at the center of the dialogue. FCs rely on this same foundation because the catalyst of the activity is the feedback I provide to a student’s original writing.

While research discussing classroom exercises in which students respond directly to feedback is not abundant, there are a few distinguished pieces of scholarship that have argued for the pedagogical implications of such activities. Berzsenyi (2001) and Gay (1998) each outlined exercises that ask students to reflect on the feedback they receive. While Gay documented the value in having students discuss their feedback in small peer groups, Berzsenyi asked students to generate a written dialogue with

her by copying the feedback and responding to each comment. In their separate studies, Berzsenyi and Gay each found that as students reflected on the feedback they received, they often did so through the lens of past negative experiences. Gay argued that in these moments of reflection, both instructor and student begin to understand the impact that past experiences play in how students react to feedback. After this recognition, students begin to move forward in their writing development.

In what follows, I offer my own feedback exercise, which operates in an online environment. Through Google Docs, my activity allows for real-time interaction between a student and an instructor that expands across the semester, providing the potential for continued development. I ask students to read through my feedback and then interpret and reflect on what I have said about their writing. In the FCs we work together to identify how students would like to advance in their writing process and the steps they may take to do so. Instructor feedback is effective when it produces a conversation with a student in which the instructor knows that they were clear and the student understands the feedback as it was intended (Straub, 1997). Further, this activity affords students an opportunity to ask for clarification or push back when they disagree with feedback.

Example FCs

The examples in this section come from a section of College Writing 2 that I taught in fall 2019 at Kent State University, a public 4-year college with seven regional campuses. During the semester, I obtained approval from Kent State's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to document the work of my course and students. College Writing 2 emphasizes the development of research strategies and continues the writing process work initiated in the first-semester college writing course. I assigned the FC activity three times, once after each major essay; I provided feedback on final drafts, as rough drafts had been assigned previously for peer review. I asked students to stick with one topic throughout the semester and to compose an argumentative essay with no use of sources, a literature review, and a

final argumentative researched essay; students participated in an FC for each. Weekly informal writing activities were assigned so students could practice reflecting on their writing development. The informal writing was all completed in Google Docs, in which I provided feedback in comments as necessary. These low-stakes assignments were reading responses and reflections on in-class activities or lessons. The smaller assignments provided students a space to reflect on their progress so I could offer encouraging feedback in preparation for the FC assignments. Prior to the first FC activity, I went over the purpose of the activity and emphasized the importance of students' engaging further in the comments on their Google Doc as I responded.

For each major essay students received my feedback the evening before a class meeting so they could have time to review it. My feedback practices correspond to Rae and Cochrane's (2008) argument that if feedback is to be effective, it should focus on providing students an opportunity for growth, not only a grade. For this reason, I provided marginal comments meant to engage students in a discussion of their rhetorical choices (e.g., audience awareness, paragraph and content organization, implementation of sources), as well as an endnote that tied my feedback to the larger goals of the assignment. I only provided in-line edits if there was a reoccurring issue that disrupted the meaning of the prose.

During the semester, I created a Google Folder for the class, and every student had their own folder in which they uploaded all assignments. I explained to them that this was a shared folder, and others could see their work. (During this particular semester, the classroom came equipped with laptops, but I have also performed FCs in a library computer lab.) I offered the students the chance to email me directly if this posed any concern, but they did not seem to mind. Eventually, this folder became a shared space for the class to work on their writing development. For each major essay, the FC activity followed this timeline:

1. Students submitted the final draft of their essay.
2. Within two weeks, I returned their essays with feedback and a grade.

3. I uploaded a Google Doc containing the FC activity to each student's folder the evening before class.
4. During class students read through my feedback and answered the prompts.
5. During class and into the following week, I responded to their observations, questions, or concerns using the “comments” feature in the Google Doc.
6. If necessary during the next class period, I gave them time in class to respond to my responses.

After the FC activity and my first round of comments on their reflections, students were encouraged to keep responding on an as-needed basis.

The sample activity I provide next was implemented after the argumentative essay. This assignment asks students to write an argument about their research topic without using sources directly in the essay. The goal of the essay is to have the students practice writing about their topic and claims in their own words during the early stages of their research process. The following questions were posed in the FC activity assigned after this essay was returned with feedback and a grade:

- First, thinking back on your essay, answer this question: So what? What is the key takeaway you want your readers to have about your topic?
- Compare your answer to the previous question to your introductory paragraph: Does this answer and what you wrote match up? Why or why not?
- Look for comments about the structure of your essay: Are these comments clear to you? Explain how and why you might integrate this feedback into your next essay. What questions do you have about how to proceed in the structuring of your next essay?
- Do I mention anything you may want to think about or consider for our next essay, the literature review? How might you use this feedback in the next steps of your research and writing processes?
- For this last question, reflect on the feedback I have given you as a whole. Do so in any way you wish, using these questions to get you

thinking reflectively: Have you ever received similar feedback from other teachers? Which bit of feedback seems the most important for you to consider while working toward our future essays and why?

I developed these questions while providing feedback; they were inspired by the work of my students and grew from trends I witnessed in their essays. My intention was to engage students by asking them to think about how they might use my comments as they progressed to the next assignment and reflect on how and why they felt a certain way about the feedback. While conducting this activity, I was self-aware of how and why I was giving feedback due to the knowledge that students would perform this reflection. The FC process might sound labor intensive, but in some ways, this is the point. Edgington (2020) indicated that reflecting on one's response practices during the act of providing feedback is crucial as instructors are thinking about their comments while they still have the chance to help their students. The act of creating this activity in conjunction with providing feedback offered me a way to hold myself accountable for the feedback I give and to ensure that the feedback I provided offered the lessons I intended.

Sample FCs With Students

During the semester, I was afforded the chance to get to know my students' writing histories and experiences in a more nuanced way through implementing FCs. In the following subsections, I offer the experiences of two students, each of whom engaged with FCs in varying levels.

Abbey

To provide further context for FCs, I will discuss a series of exchanges with a student whom I will call Abbey, a first-year traditional student who is a first-language speaker of English: In the dialogue during one of our FCs, I identified certain reasons behind her rhetorical choices, which later informed the way I provided her feedback. The influence of her reflections on my feedback practices was important as I was better able to individualize my feedback to Abbey's particular needs, and she in turn

began to think more deeply about the choices she made while writing. Abbey’s writing proved that she had clear ideas and intentions, but she needed encouragement and direction to develop these concepts.

Throughout the body of Abbey’s second essay (an argument without outside sources), I provided rhetorical questions in the margins to prompt her to engage more deeply with her claims. In the endnote, I told her that the essay showed promise in forming an argument that could be used to structure future research; however, her essay’s main issue was the presence of under-developed claims:

This paper is also about 300 words short on the assigned word count so you have plenty of space to fully develop each claim. I mentioned some questions to get you thinking more deeply about each in the margins. Make sure you devote more time to really proving your argument.

In her FC activity, when asked to reflect on the feedback as a whole and if she had received any similar comments in the past, Abbey stated:

It usually depends on how well informed I am on a topic. I usually try to stay extremely organized and structure[d] through my writing[,] but sometimes I end up losing focus from time to time and get disorganized towards the end. Most of the feedback I get is towards the middle or end, like the feedback mentioned in this essay. I tend to get sloppy towards the end because I start getting angry with how my writing is sounding and don’t like it. This makes me eventually give up and start getting more lazy towards the end because I don’t want to reread it.

In this reflection, Abbey equated my suggestion to expand on her claims in more detail to her writing process in general, in which she would become disillusioned and overwhelmed with the whole process. Though I saw the discussion as neutral and her under-stated claims as something we could work on as the class progressed, Abbey took the feedback as a signifier that I was identifying her work as “sloppy” and perhaps somehow incorrect. During the FC activity, I pushed against this notion

in a comment on her Google Doc, asking, “I am curious about your process at this stage: do you tend to write from beginning to end, in one long session? Or do you break it up, and by ‘get to the end’ you mean when you are writing the rest of your essay?” She then responded,

I tend to write my entire essay in typically one or two long sessions. It typically starts with focusing [the] majority of the time on the beginning of the essay (introduction paragraph and first body paragraph) and then I slowly start to give up towards the conclusion (in the same sitting). I’m somewhat a perfectionist so I don’t like doing a “rough draft” per say, I just keep redoing my writing over and over again in one complete sitting. It usually is just one full day of writing and editing and then I’m done.

The process that Abbey described is quite common among college students (Williams, 2003). While I do not claim that the FC activity was able to change the way she wrote, when I responded to Abbey, I pointed out that her word choice implied that her writing process was creating anxiety and frustration for her, and she opened up to the possibility of trying a different process. During the course of the semester, Abbey experimented by using outlines, which she claimed were new to her, as a means of prewriting and composing a draft for peer review.

To further the introspective work of these FCs, at the end of the semester students wrote a reflection essay about their time in the class. In her essay, Abbey directly discussed her previous writing process of only writing in one sitting:

A[n] issue with this technique is that I never really have an actual rough draft until getting the advice back. This leads me to struggle with what my ideas were and how I developed the paper in the first place, making it challenging to go back in and make corrections . . . In my future essays I [will] take more time to work out what information and evidence I need to further my claim to help the reader get a better understanding of my perspective.

It is worth noting that Abbey wrote this reflection directly to me, her instructor. However, what is exciting in this excerpt is the connection Abbey made between “taking more time” and her ability to write more persuasively and effectively. Abbey went from feeling frustrated during writing to proud of her resulting essay after she spent more time with her writing process. Abbey shifted away from using negative language when discussing her writing process and acknowledged that she had grown as a writer, signifying that she had taken the lessons of the course and used them to develop her own relationship to writing.

Taylor

Abbey’s work exemplifies the positive effects of asking students to reflect consistently on their writing development; however, not all students are as willing or able to reflect honestly on their writing process. Only students who actively engaged in the comments connected to the initial FC activity seemed to reflect the high level of metacognition Abbey exhibited. I was afforded the opportunity to learn more about every student and their writing history regardless of engagement. For example, a student whom I will call Taylor, a first-year traditional student who is nonbinary and a first-language speaker of English, did not engage in the FC activity beyond answering the initial questions. Their participation in the initial activity, however, allowed them the opportunity to express their concern with some of my feedback, leaving such comments as “I don’t know what is being asked, how am I supposed to phrase this?” and “Honestly, I am not sure what a counterargument is.” Taylor indicated in their end-of-semester reflection essay that they used to “not read the feedback from [their] instructors,” which indicates to me that the type of reflective work required to complete an FC activity might not be something they were familiar with, a conclusion that explains their reluctance to engage further in FCs. Despite the absence of involved reflection, by assigning Taylor to read through and write about my feedback during class, I opened a space for them to engage in the reflection process when they may not have otherwise.

Whereas Abbey's end-of-the-semester reflection showcases how her engagement in FCs allowed her to rethink her writing approach, Taylor wrote an essay that documented only specific changes they would have made for each assignment, with little insight as to how these lessons may help them in the future. While I may not have been able to reach Taylor at the same level as Abbey, their answers to the initial questions for each FC ensured that moving forward, they had a clearer understanding of specific class lessons, an understanding reflected by some progress in their writing. What Taylor's experience documents is that in its simplest form, FCs give students who may otherwise shy away from asking questions the chance to practice verbalizing their uncertainty and receive answers and encouragement. In directly offering Taylor the chance to express any uncertainties, I showed them that asking for clarity is a part of the writing process.

Pedagogical Implications of Assigning FCs

Students who produced substantial reflective narratives at the end of the semester often were those who consistently engaged in depth with FCs. Students who participated honestly in the FCs almost always discussed a developing understanding of how they were learning to write. Thus, FCs are valuable in a writing class; instructors can elevate the lessons they craft within their feedback due to the writing-conference nature of the activity. However, unlike an in-person conference, the virtual platform of Google Docs allows instructors and students to engage in the activity beyond a single meeting. While the initial part of an FC activity may take place during a class period, digital conversations can happen at any time, offering flexibility for students and instructors. While I do not propose that this activity should replace in-person conferences, it does offer a virtual opportunity for writing conference-style work if there is not an easy time or place to hold these sessions during a semester, as might be the case in an online course.

I have implemented FCs in each subsequent class since this initial study, and the activity has become an essential part of my feedback

practices. Knowing that I will ask students to engage with my feedback and connect the comments to their development increases my awareness of how personal my feedback may be for students. Remaining conscious of this fact challenges me during my feedback process to revise and ensure my feedback is effectively creating these individual lessons. It is often during these moments of revision that I find myself reflecting on the purpose of my pedagogical choices and in what direction I would potentially like to develop my teaching further.

An important note I should offer is that at the time of this study I did not assign a point value for student responses to my comments on their FCs, but I have subsequently made continued responding a part of class participation to encourage a higher level of engagement in this activity for all students. While my original intention was for students to reflect the level of engagement exemplified by Taylor, I have been pleasantly surprised in the semesters since by the willingness of many students to engage reflectively at the level that Abbey exemplified. By adding a participation grade for responding to my comments, I have seen an increase in engagement, which makes me confident that the value of this activity lies in the opportunity it presents for students to take ownership of their writing development and participate in the feedback process.

Apart from the need to reflect on and revise my feedback, performing FCs has heightened my understanding of the role that tone has in how students receive feedback. I previously viewed comments such as “Make sure to keep your documentation consistent” or “Is this information coming from a source? Make sure to cite” were small suggestions I wanted students to keep in mind for future essays. However, during FCs I observed students reflecting on such comments as signifiers that they had failed in their writing. The FC activity has allowed me to recognize that certain phrases in my feedback instigate this feeling of failure, which may inhibit a student’s desire to work at developing their writing process (Ryan & Henderson, 2018). I can help students read my feedback less harshly by leading with positive feedback and by elaborating why students

should consider my comments as advice and not identifiers of failure. By actively reflecting on my feedback, I, too, am engaging in reflective learning—I am forced to remain aware that my students will be reading my comments and that I will need to respond to their reflection on the feedback.

Conclusion

There is still more that I may learn about this activity and its pedagogical implications. One realization is that since I started asking students to engage directly with my feedback and to expect my response, I have become more conscientious about the feedback I provide. In seeing directly how students interpret comments and discuss the ways in which they use my feedback during their writing process, I learn more about my students and where they are in their development. Students often comment during this activity that they did not realize the importance of instructor feedback until they were asked to read through and consider how they would use it in their future writing.

Edgington (2020) argued that instructors should not shy away from reflecting on how they respond to student writing and that engaging in active reflection may lead to the development of more effective pedagogy. FCs not only offer a way for instructors to confirm students have read their feedback but also allow them to situate their feedback to student writing as a fundamental component of their course and to continually reflect on the impact their comments have on their students' writing development. Thinking of this activity as a conversation means that both parties have a role to play: While students reflect on the feedback they receive, instructors guide their reflection and can intervene if students misinterpret or misunderstand comments. By asking students to be a part of the conversation, instructors show each student that they can have an active role in their learning process.

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