Feedback through Dialectical Notebooks

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ABSTRACT

In its various forms, feedback serves not only as a tool for correcting students' mistakes and errors but also as a guide for future improvement, which is often referred to as feed-forward. Understanding the optimal balance and nature of this feedback is crucial for educators who aim to enhance their students' learning experiences and outcomes. This investigation will delve into how feedback can become an effective tool in students' learning experience through the application of a Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) techniques – the Dialectical Notebook. By examining existing literature, conducting empirical research, and analyzing feedback practices in composition classes, this paper aims to identify best practices for providing constructive, actionable, and meaningful feedback from both the teacher and the students' peers. The ultimate goal is to inform and support educators in their efforts to help students internalize meaningful feedback that not only addresses their current performance but also equips them with the skills and confidence to excel in future writing endeavors. Through this exploration, the paper will contribute to the broader discourse on educational feedback mechanisms and their impact on student learning within the context of American University in Bulgaria's (AUBG) academic environment.

1   INTRODUCTION

In any learning activity, the feedback provided is regarded as the most important part of the whole communication. Feedback and feed-forward are of essential importance in guiding the academic progress of every student. As for the composition classes, in which the students' ability to use language, structure, and argument has to be developed, the in-class commentary and out-of-class feedback that students receive can help in the assimilation of new information and thus enhance students' writing capabilities.

The AUBG student body is comprised of individuals from numerous countries and various cultural backgrounds. This diversity enriches the learning environment through a vibrant exchange of ideas and perspectives. The students at AUBG bring varied experiences and expectations to the classroom, making the delivery of personalized and effective feedback even more crucial. ENG 1002 is designed to advance students' skills in academic writing and research, building upon the foundation established in the ENG 1001: *Exposition* course. The course focuses on the development of argument-based and analytical writing, essential for advanced academic discourse. Students learn to craft convincing arguments, evaluate sources for reliability, and incorporate evidence effectively. The major assignments include a research paper that makes an argument, an annotated bibliography, and an analytical research paper, all aimed at enhancing students' ability to conduct and present thorough academic research. Through all these assignments, the course aims to emphasize the importance of academic integrity and proper documentation, ensuring that students understand how to paraphrase, quote, and cite sources using the MLA format.

This working paper, prepared as a capstone project with the Center for Liberal Arts & Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP), seeks to establish trends in giving feedback and feed-forward on students' essays at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) within the ENG 1002: *Writing Academic Research Papers* course in particular.

2 PREVIOUS FEEDBACK PRACTICES

- *Draft Reviews and Peer Feedback*: Students are encouraged to come up with and submit rough drafts of some short form writing, which will be critiqued not only by one other but by the instructor as well. Usually, students are then open to being corrected so they can then improve their writing as well as the general concept of the submission summary in their subsequent essays. However, this type of feedback often depends on surface engagement, limited reflection, and one-way directional feedback. Thus, students tend to pay more attention to surface errors than to broad or creative issues.
- *Instructor Comments*: Certainly, the instructor tries to give as many comments on the assignments as possible to determine what is good and what is not. AUBG uses the Canvas LMS, which in addition to the common ways of annotating a text, includes a highlight annotation tool that helps teachers indicate particular aspects that require improvement in the student's writing. This gets the more visual students to grasp the concept of the sort of repetitive mistake that they keep making. Still, in some cases, the feedback can be a one-way street, so to speak, and stu-

dents may simply fix grammatical or spelling mistakes without deeper reflection on their writing errors.

- *Grading Rubrics*: Typically, the application of grading rubrics enhances the objectivity of the evaluation process and assists the students in understanding how to attain success. The ENG 1002 rubrics encompass elements such as thesis clarity, development of the argument, support for the evidence, organization of the text, variety in style and mechanics of language. On the other hand, grading matrices provide students with clearly stated objectives but mostly a restricted student engagement to always tick the boxes instead of taking the challenge to write. When grades are based on the fact about specific point categories which have to be met, everyone falls into the trap of writing in a formulaic way, e.g. students try to "match the points" instead of thinking critically, creatively, and/or analytically.

- *One-on-One Conferences*: Student-instructor conferences offer direct feedback and provide the opportunity for students to discuss strategies that have been effective, and challenges encountered with writing. Students can address specific questions in person and get immediate help. In my experience, these conferences allow students who are introverted to come out of their comfort zone and even establish a good relationship with their instructors. However, these individual conferences put the student in an entirely passive role, as though passively listening to feedback rather than engaging in deep reflection.

- *Feed-Forward Sessions*: These sessions target future assignments and support the students in applying lessons learned from previous feedback. These target continuous improvement and development of the writing skills. Unfortunately, the big class size does not allow such sessions to occur often; this is why I only do them with the lower-level language skills students and only during office hours. Because such access is restricted, the student body at large cannot benefit from ongoing personalized guidance in their work.

3   METHODOLOGY

This paper discusses the Dialectical Notebook as one of the IWT writing techniques. The paper will examine how this technique can be further enhanced in internalizing feedback knowledge by students. The reason for choosing this technique includes text organization clarity and involvement in a student's communicative endeavours. The focus will be on how this technique helps students understand and transform feedback into their knowledge database through self-reflection and analysis by peers. Thus, the research question will address whether this technique can also be employed in the feed-forward learning processes of students.

The methodology will take a single approach – mainly a qualitative investigation of the researched data. This analysis will allow for a deeper understanding of how this IWT writing technique can help students internalize feedback knowledge. The technique was applied in a class of twenty-four students taking the foundational course ENG 1002 in their first year, second semester studies at AUBG.

4   LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on feedback practices points to various strengths and limitations of the current methods such as those listed in the Current Feedback Practices section above. For example, instructor comments often offer focused feedback; however, as Hattie and Timperley contend, feedback needs to transcend the immediate task and corrective level into engaging students in self-regulation and deeper cognitive processing.[1] Students need guidance that encourages awareness of how to use feedback to improve both the current task and the learning approaches themselves. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick also consider feedback as part of an interactive dialogue rather than a one-way information transmission.[2] Boud and Molloy further argue that feedback needs to be re-conceptualized as a process, not a product.[3] They recommend moving toward "feedback as dialogue" where students and teachers are continuously talking about learning and improvement. This is in contrast to the traditional feedback models where the teacher is the main provider of comments and corrections. The two authors introduce the concept of sustainable assessment through feedback, that is, students learn to seek, understand, and use feedback independently; hence, long-term learning is fostered.

Sadler further explains that the most effective feedback happens when students can "close the feedback loop", which is necessary when advice clearly explains what to do in order to reduce the difference between current and wanted performance.[4] This, again, often pertains to practices in which grading rubrics are used, since these also tend to foster a checklist mentality, as mentioned above. Brookhart also remarked that while rubrics help make expectations clear, they often do little to promote the deep, critical thinking which is at the heart of significant intellectual growth.[5] Winstone et al. indicated a need for feedback to involve student agency.[6] That is to say, students should not merely receive feedback but be engaged with it themselves. It involves self-regulation and reflection by the learner on how to constructively use the feedback. The authors go on to propose a taxonomy for processes through which students might develop better engagement with feedback, including cognitive processing of and emotional responses to feedback and regulation of self. This research definitely aligns with dialectical notebook practices.

Carless and Boud focus their method on developing student "feedback literacy," defined as the student's capacity to make sense of, reflect on, and act effectively on feedback.[7] They feel that often students either cannot or will not interpret or engage with feedback. To this end, the authors recommend that students be taught to use feedback productively by creating an environment supportive of reflection and one in which students can take responsibility for their learning. Dawson et al., explored teacher and student views on what constitutes helpful feedback. They cite timeliness, specificity, and suggestions for improvement as some of the key components.[8] A concern that they have is that feelings of students about any feedback account for a very significant impact in receiving and using feedback. The study again underlines the supportive culture of feedback regarding not only the cognitive aspects but also taking care of the emotional and motivational issues to make sure that feedback is understood as constructive in learning.

As Carless[9] and Evans[10] point out, feedback can be provided in an ongoing dialogic process. It is something students themselves should foster through continuous engagement and active participation in the learning process. The dialectical notebook takes this one step further by creating multiple feedback loops; at a number of levels, students and peers are able to provide insights. This, therefore, really develops a much richer, multi-directional conversation around feedback. This is important in terms of considering that feedback is not merely taken up in isolation in one conference but rather part of an iterative learning process. Ajjawi and Boud explore how feedback dialogues influence student learning.[11] The authors comment that for feedback to be effectively carried out, there needs to be some kind of ongoing exchange between a student and the instructor through encouraging students to reflect, question, and clarify misunderstandings. In turn, this develops the ability of students to self-regulate their learning and constructively respond to feedback through a dialogic approach. The implication for such dialogue in the curriculum is to make space for them since they improve engagement and deeper understanding.

5   FINDINGS

As the course began, I found it essential to introduce the three types of IWT Freewriting techniques that students were supposed to use as tools to accelerate and improve their writing skills. These practices were applied for almost all activities done in class with the hope that students would also use them outside the classroom. Students were expected to write with a pen and paper while the essay had to be submitted online through the Learning Management System (LMS).

The introduction to the practices happened on the second day of the semester after the students were formally acquainted with the syllabus and the course in general. The private Freewriting was introduced with the idea that it would serve as a stepping stone toward starting to think positively about writing and to help them break through the fear of writing. Private Freewriting, as an unstructured and personal exercise, allows students to express their thoughts without the pressure of evaluation or judgment. This technique encourages the free flow of ideas and helps students to get into the mood of writing, thereby reducing the initial resistance and anxiety often associated with writing tasks.

Private Freewriting helps students to channel their thoughts and ideas onto a piece of paper in the most relaxed environment. This activity provides a sense of ownership and helps students to develop confidence in writing. The main idea of Private Freewriting is not to create polished work but to create raw material which may be refined at a later stage if the student keeps his or her focus on it. This helps the students to overcome the writer's block and build a habit of regular writing. Students eventually view writing as a process rather than a one-time task and appreciate the value of drafting and revising if applied over time.

Furthermore, Private Freewriting can serve as a warm-up exercise for both the classroom activities and/or the preparation process for the more structured writing assignments. It allows students to experiment with different styles and voices and ultimately build a more authentic and personal expression in their academic essays. It also aims to help students develop a more positive relationship with writing and possibly start seeing it as an enjoyable and creative activity rather than a daunting chore.

Despite all this, Private Freewriting should be approached thoughtfully, as not all students are equally receptive to this practice. Some students may not be in the right mindset for writing on certain days, thus finding difficulties that may restrain them from efficiently participating in the activity. Others might struggle with generating ideas or feel themselves uninspired and do not know what to write about. Lack of structure may also present problems for students unaccustomed to Freewriting or who consider it as unproductive. These challenges should be recognized and sometimes faculty could even help by offering prompts to those students who are completely lost. Thus, Private Freewriting will be much more relevant and useful for all students when provided with an accepting environment in which such and other concerns can be minimized, if not eliminated.

Focused Freewriting compared to Private Freewriting is more dynamic and exploratory. This method combines spontaneous writing with a greater degree of focus. Unlike Private Freewriting, Focused Freewriting starts with a specific prompt or question. That may take the form of a text, an image, or a set of interconnected questions designed to open up a topic or text to a broader interpretation. The point of Focused Freewriting is to write without pause within a set period of time without stopping to think or revise. That is, one wants to simply keep the pen moving, allowing ideas to flow freely, without the impediments of structured thinking. Again, this practice is intended to be generative and exploratory rather than producing a polished, carefully crafted paragraph.

This writing technique often involves sharing of the written work with the others. The sharing aspect can help students articulate and discover their ideas about a text or topic and later stimulate discussion and deepen students' engagement with the task. It also helps students:

- Expand critical thinking: Freewriting helps students focus on the subject matter without the burden of immediate analytical judgment. In writing freely in response to a prompt, students can explore not only the different perspectives but also the connections that are brought about. Without the feeling of restriction, their exploration gives them ample opportunity to visualize other perspectives and build more subtle arguments. This cements critical thinking into the minds of the students.
- Inspire creativity: the practice of continuous writing without overthinking will definitely promote creativity. Students can put on paper whatever is on their mind – anything without the constraints of traditional structure or the anxiety that they will make a mistake. This could turn out to be quite surprising in the form of unusual ideas and insights because students have not put themselves in a box by traditional writing rules and expectations.
- Enhance active classroom engagement: Focused Freewriting actively involves students in the learning process. In responding to a prompt that in some way addresses the course material, students are more actively processing the course content. The act of writing helps them process and internalize it, which will make the information even more meaningful and memorable. Sharing with their peers further stimulates engagement through discussion and collaborative learning.
- Stimulate peer-to-peer discussions: when students share their Focused Freewriting with the class, it serves as a discussion stimulus. Various responses to the same prompt show varied means of interpretation and insight, thus enriching classroom

discussion. A communal aspect to Focused Freewriting helps build a collaborative learning environment where students are more comfortable to express ideas.

- Improve the articulation of ideas: regular practice of Focused Freewriting will help students quickly find their own voice and speak their mind concisely and clearly. As they become comfortable doing this type of writing, they will also learn how to rapidly organize their thoughts for other kinds of academic writing, and even for verbal presentations, such as delivering speeches.

Immediately after students were acquainted with both Freewriting techniques, I had them practice the Focused Freewriting with the simple prompt "Write down as many advantages and disadvantages of Private Freewriting within seven minutes. Give a quick explanation for your choice after the seven minutes are finished. Please, go back to your writing and bracket one advantage/disadvantage you would like to share with the whole class." The purpose of this exercise was to provoke students to start thinking about the positive (and many not so positive) aspects of these writing techniques. Here are some of the more interesting results:

Advantages

- Helping you feel better
- Building a safe space
- Boosting creativity and productivity
- Promoting self-reflection
- Working under pressure
- Being honest
- Challenging the mental block of having something perfectly written
- Helping you brainstorm and think faster

Disadvantages

- Getting lost in your thoughts
- Not being able to come up with a topic to write on
- Cannot learn from each other
- Lack of feedback
- Diving into too much self-centeredness
- Being emotionally charged
- Lack of self-discipline

On the positive side, students indicated an appreciation for the personal growth and mental clarity that can emerge from such activities/exercises. These advantages suggest that students value the freedom to express their thoughts without the constraints of formal writing, allowing for a more honest and productive flow of ideas. Still, they stressed that the lack of peer communication and feedback hinders their learning process – something that definitely can be improved with a Dialectical Notebook.

Process (or Metacognitive) Writing, according to IWT, is a type of writing that has students reflect upon their writing and thinking by building awareness of (and thereby making deeper connections between) writing and thought. This helps students to monitor their progress, develop an understanding of their writing habits, and discover new ideas. It can also stimulate collective reflection and discussion. However, its open-ended format can leave some students uncertain as to how to approach the experience and thus respond at a surface level of reflection or perhaps not at all. It is also cumbersome and emotionally draining for those learners who have a background of more controlled, results-focused methods. Indeed, providing more guidance and structured prompts can enhance its effectiveness while making it accessible to a wider range of students.

6   THE DIALECTICAL NOTEBOOK

6.1   INITIAL EXAMPLE

Together with Derek Furr, Dean of Teacher Education at Bard College, one of our instructors at CLASP, we did a version of the Dialectical Notebook, having read a text beforehand. These are the prompts Derek used for the exercise:

Our next writing practice is an extended exercise called "dialectical" or "dialogical" notebooks, depending on whom you ask. There are many versions. Here is one.

Explain how to set up the paper. Here I handed out blank paper, we folded it in half, and made four "pages." It's also easy simply to do this in students' notebooks by asking them to create four columns or sections across a couple of pages. There are other variations on this theme...

1   *FFW1:* Select a short (2–3 sentences) passage from "Engaged Pedagogy," copy it, and write as a means to exploring it.

Pass to the right.

2   *FFW2:* Read and respond to your peer. End your response with a question about the article or about ideas raised by your peer.

Pass to the right.

3   *FFW3:* Read both entries. Engage with the question from the second entry. End with a new quotation from the hooks article.

Pass to the right.

4   *FFW4:* Read all entries. How does bell hooks challenge you as an educator? What do you believe or doubt about this piece?

Return to the owner.

5   *Read the notebook entries:* Bracket a portion (2–3 sentences maximum) from any of the entries that you find especially compelling and would like to share.

Hear these around the room.

6   *Process Talk:* What was it like to do the extended writing?"

Immediately, I got inspired by this writing technique as I had been looking for such an immersive exercise to help students better comprehend the idea of scholarship conversation, i.e., keeping a high academic integrity in their papers. The concept of scholarly conversation is quite difficult to understand, especially in the context of Eastern European countries where the majority of the students are taught at high school to use direct copy of someone's work and present it as their own. Hence, this writing technique was a perfect example of how students could adopt this abstract idea when writing papers. And after having done the Dialectical Notebook twice in the same fashion as Derek Furr, I started thinking about ways this could be revamped so it helps students work with feedback that I would give them; feedback that would often be misunderstood or even left unread.

6.2   FIRST DRAFT

Therefore, I drafted the following exercise that was based on Derek Furr's. Note that in my version, there are three people working with the Dialectical Notebook – the writer of the essays plus two peers:

1 *Work with your feedback:* Take a piece of feedback from the comments I left on your essay. Write the feedback down exactly as it was given. Reflect on it: What do you understand from it?

Pass your paper to the right.

2 *Peer Response*: Read your peer's reflection on their feedback. Offer your thoughts: Do you see the feedback differently? Can you suggest ways your peer might improve on the error? How? End with a question that helps them think further about the feedback.

Pass the paper to the right.

3 *Engage and advise*: Read the first two entries. Respond to the question posed by the second person. Offer a strategy or advice to help your peer address the feedback.

Return the paper to the original owner.

4 *Reflect*: Read all the entries in your sheet of paper. How have your peers' responses challenged you as a writer? What will you take from this process to apply to your revisions?

Write your thoughts in the final section.

5 *Sharing*: Read through the responses in your notebook. Choose 2–3 sentences from any entry that stood out to you and share it with the class.

Hear these around the room.

6 *Class Discussion*: Reflect as a class: How did engaging with feedback through this process affect your understanding? What insights will you take forward into your next draft?

The exercise was not successful, mainly because students aimed for the easier type of feedback, i.e., the surface-level grammar errors. This led to almost no room for communication with the rest of the peers and almost no room for reflection. Hence, I am planning for the next spring semester to update the exercise and focus only on the analysis-level feedback. I am also expanding the portion of reflection with one more peer. This is what the planned activity looks like:

6.3   UPDATED ACTIVITY

Assignment: Engaging with Professor's Feedback

Our next writing practice has many names but is generally an extended version of an exercise called "Dialectical" or "Dialogical" Notebooks. Here is one designed to help you engage deeply with feedback on your essays:

- start with a blank sheet of paper or use your notebook, creating four columns or sections across a couple of pages.;
- label the columns or sections as follows: "Feedback," "Response 1," "Response 2," and "Reflection.";
- remember each respondent gives their entry only on the dedicated page.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1 *Feedback* (*FFW1*): work with the specific piece of feedback from your professor from a/the (recent) essay – this could be a comment or a suggestion. In either case, choose feedback related to the analysis of the paper. Write down the feedback verbatim in the first section. Take a few minutes to explore this feedback in writing. What do you understand/learn from it? How does it relate to your work and your writing process?

Pass your paper/notebook to the person on your right.

2 *Response 1* (*FFW2*): read your peer's exploration of the feedback. Respond to it in the second section. Consider the following: Do you see the feedback differently? Can you offer any insights or strategies for addressing the feedback? Can you suggest different feedback besides the one the professor has offered? End your response with a question that could help your peer think further about the feedback and/or the error they have committed.

Pass your paper/notebook to the person on your right.

3 *Response 2* (*FFW3*): read the first two entries. Engage with the question posed by the second person. Add your thoughts, and if possible, connect them to your essay or the writing process in general. End with a strategy or simply a piece of advice your peer might take to address the feedback.

Pass your paper/notebook to the person on your right.

4 *Reflection* (*FFW4*): read all the entries. Reflect on how the feedback and your peers' responses challenge you as a writer. What will you take away from this dialogue? What strategies or insights will you apply to your own revision process? Write down your thoughts in the final section.

Return the notebook to the original owner.

5 *Sharing:* read through the entries in your notebook. Bracket a portion (2-3 sentences maximum) from any of the entries that you find especially compelling and would like to share with the class.

Share these selections around the room.

6 *Process Talk:* discuss with the class: What was it like to engage deeply with feedback through this extended writing exercise? How did your peers' insights influence your understanding of the feedback? What will you carry forward into your next draft?

Preparation Exercise:
Critical Self-assessment and
Goal-setting

As the exercise was challenging, I decided to introduce another one prior to the Dialectical Notebook to engage the students with some higher-order thinking practice. My hope is that this activity will encourage students to reflect on their writing process, critically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and set specific goals for improvement before they engage with the feedback dialogue. The objective is to encourage students to critically evaluate their own writing, identify key areas for improvement, and set specific, actionable goals before engaging with peer and professor feedback.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1 *Reflect on the Writing Process:* ask students to take 10–15 minutes to write a reflective piece about their most recent essay. Encourage them to consider the following questions such as:

- What was your approach to this essay? How did you plan, draft, and revise your work?
- What aspects of the essay do you feel most confident about? Why?
- What aspects of the essay do you feel less confident about?
- What challenges did you encounter? How did you address those challenges during the writing process?

2 *Self-Assessment*: next, students should review their essay in light of specific criteria (e.g., thesis clarity, argument development, evidence use, organization, grammar/style). Have students score their essay according to the rubric.

3 *Identify Strengths and Areas for Improvement*: ask students to identify 2-3 specific strengths in their writing, explaining why these are strengths and how they contribute to the overall effectiveness of the essay. Then, ask them to identify 2-3 specific areas where they feel their writing could improve.Encourage them to be as specific as possible (e.g., "*I need to strengthen my thesis statement by...,*" rather than "*I need to improve my writing*").

4 *Goal-setting*: have students set 2-3 specific, measurable goals for their next writing assignment. For each goal, ask them to describe a concrete action plan. For example:

- Goal: Improve the clarity of my thesis statement.
- Action Plan: I will spend more time brainstorming and drafting multiple versions of my thesis statement before choosing the final one. I will also seek feedback on the thesis during the drafting process.

5 *Peer Discussion*: pair students up and have them share their self-assessments and goals with a peer. Encourage them to provide constructive feedback on each other's goals and suggest additional strategies or resources that might help achieve those goals.

6 *Class Debrief*: bring the class together for a discussion. Ask:

- What did you learn about your own writing through this self-assessment?
- How did your peer's feedback influence your goals?
- What strategies are you most excited to implement in your next essay?

Same as the Process Writing, this exercise encourages metacognition, self-awareness, and strategic thinking. By critically assessing their own work and setting specific goals, students will be better prepared to engage deeply with the professor's feedback in the subsequent dialectical notebook exercise. This also helps them approach feedback as a tool for growth rather than simply a critique.

7   CONCLUSION

The Dialectical Notebook exercise presented in this paper incorporates collaborative feedback within the writing process and peer-driven reflection of a student's writing. While collaboration strengthens their peer communication and revision, the students tend to focus on simpler feedback. This exercise, in which multiple peers participate, aims to shift the focus away from the surface-level feedback, like grammar and vocabulary use, toward more substantive discussions at the level of analysis. Students exposed to this approach will be able to further their writing through the multiple perspectives available in such discussion; writing as a process is a major focus of this method. In order to create better potential from this exercise, it needs to have clearer guidelines about the higher-order feedback so that the students can take full advantage of such a higher-order reflective process.

NOTES

 1 2007

 2 2006

 3 2012

 4 1989, PP 120-1

 5 2008

 6 2017

 7 2018

 8 2019

 9 2006

10 2013

11 2018

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