

CHAPTER 15. PEER FEEDBACK TO FACILITATE INDEPENDENT LEARNING AMONG FIRST-YEAR SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS

Alica Rétiová, Masaryk University

Coach: Vicky Davies, Staff and Educational Development Association

Keywords: first-year students, independent learning, peer feedback, sociology, writing skills

Introduction

The first year at university may be extremely challenging for students, especially due to the transition from a markedly different high school educational system (Yorke and Longden 2008: 23 and 29; Hassel and Ridout 2018) to a university system that stresses the importance of independent learning. This is not only because of a new curriculum but also because students in their new roles as independent learners become partners of teachers by sharing responsibility for the overall learning process (Cook-Sather and Abbot 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2018). They face a new expectation of working on tasks independently within their own areas of interest. This applies no less to those students who are enrolled in the introductory sociology seminar at Masaryk University. It was no different last semester when I gave my students a first glimpse of the intriguing world of social theories and introduced them to the fascinating realm that is academia. To facilitate the process of my students becoming independent learners who concomitantly develop their writing skills, an innovative teaching activity has been added to the course: the writing of peer feedback on weekly position papers. The rationale is twofold. First, the activity is a useful training exercise for students in taking an active self-governing role, which can positively affect students' academic success (Hassel and Ridout 2018: 12). Second, the writing of feedback develops key critical thinking and self-reflective skills that are also important for the improvement of students' own writing (Nicol et al. 2014: 120).

This chapter presents the evaluation of the impact of the innovation by exploring whether and, if so, to what extent the activity contributed to the development of students' academic writing skills and contributed to students becoming independent learners. It was found that exchanging feedback with peers contributes to the improvement of writing skills as well as the development of critical thinking, collaborative skills and partly to their confidence as independent learners. The analysis also revealed that some students struggle with feelings of self-doubt upon assessing others, which I see as a consequence of the process of acquiring their new roles of independent learners in higher education.

Peer feedback: from theory to practice

I introduced my teaching innovation at the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University in the fall of 2018. Here students are required to write academic texts as a part of almost every course

within the programme, but they lack systematic support in developing their writing skills and acquiring the habits of independent learners. The proseminar course Introduction to Sociology, in which the innovation took place, also requires students to complete weekly writing assignments. It is a compulsory seminar for first-year students with the objective of introducing basic sociological concepts and general academic skills. To pass the course, students are required to submit ten position papers during the semester and a final essay at the end of the semester. Usually students receive brief feedback from their teacher on their papers in the first weeks of the semester and are provided with a short commentary on their final essays.

To implement the innovation, I included a peer feedback activity in my seminar group of twenty-one students¹. In order to ensure that students are seriously engaged in the activity, the submission of peer feedback was made mandatory. Since the course is graded as either pass or fail, the innovation was allowed by the course guarantor in my seminar group. Students were required to write at least one hundred words in their feedback, focusing on both 'feeding back' and 'feeding forward'. 'Feeding back' required them to evaluate the quality of the text. When 'feeding forward', they provided recommendations for future improvement.

The foundations for the peer feedback activity were implemented in two ways. In the first half of the semester I gave detailed weekly feedback on the content, structure, language and style of position papers to set a standard model of good practice. Second, in the first innovation-related session I provided students with detailed instructions for the activity and asked them to brainstorm on the characteristics of providing constructive feedback while collecting their ideas using a white board. Consequently, I distributed four examples of feedback among students and asked them to discuss which examples represent constructive feedback and why.

In the subsequent three weeks, students wrote feedback on each other's position papers within peer triads. Thus, in addition to writing a position paper by Friday midnight, each student submitted also feedback on the papers of the other two members of the triad by Sunday evening. This way students could read the feedback before Monday's seminar session. The triads remained unchanged over the three weeks of the innovation so that continuity and trust among students could be established.

The activity was complemented by a limited in-class component. We started each innovation-related seminar with a short 5-10-minute discussion on potential problems or areas of confusion related to the peer feedback assignment. Since I read both their position papers and feedback, I was in a good position to assist them with these issues.

My expectations about the innovation were as follows: first, in line with the formative assessment, I expected the activity to serve as an 'assessment *for* learning': to facilitate the improvement of student writing skills (hypothesis 1) since before reviewing the work of other students, students first need to master the material (Nicol et al. 2014: 120). Secondly, I expected the activi-

¹ The course has four seminar groups with a maximum twenty-three students per group.

ty to be executed within the scope of 'assessment as learning' as students were supposed to learn to make informed judgements about the quality of the work of their peers (Nicol et al. 2014: 120). In practical terms, students were expected to become familiar with their roles as independent learners (hypothesis 2), that is, to grow in confidence and trust (hypothesis 2A) by taking control of their learning (Cook-Sather and Abbot 2016), developing their critical thinking and self-reflective skills (hypothesis 2B) and offering support to- and cooperating with peers (hypothesis 2C). These attributes of becoming independent learners can significantly contribute to the increased quality of academic texts.

Data and methods

I relied on triangulation when collecting and analysing the data, and used four different data sources that represent the three different perspectives on peer feedback from the point of view of the independent observer, the teacher and the student. The first step was to invite my colleague to observe how I would present the assignment and the related active learning exercises, brainstorming session and student discussions. A discussion of her observations would take place after the class.

The teacher's perspective on the development of the writing skills of the students was documented in my teaching diary. From the first week of the innovation to the submission of the final essay, I recorded and traced student progress in terms of academic writing skills. During this, students submitted four position papers and a final essay, which I marked on a five-point scale (1=worst, 5=best)². Additionally, I compared the students' writings with the corresponding peer feedback to track progress both within the scope of student writing skills and the impact of peer feedback on further developing those writing skills.

The student perspective was measured by two research instruments: minute papers and a final questionnaire. The minute papers served as brief reports on the activity with the objective to follow progress from the students' perspective at three points in time. Thus, the same questions were repeated at different time intervals and the same questions were administered during each session after the conclusion of the peer feedback assignment. Students were asked to indicate their responses on a five-point Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree) regarding the following statements: 1) Writing peer feedback was easy for me this week, 2) I felt confident in writing peer feedback this week, 3) The peer feedback I received this week was useful to me. After each question they were asked to elaborate on their choices. Additionally, there were two open-ended questions that asked them to describe what they learned from writing and receiving peer feedback during that week.

Students also filled in the final questionnaire once the activity was concluded. Its objective was to capture the perspective of the students on the effectiveness of the innovation after the com-

² Marks were used only for the purpose of this evaluation and not presented to students.

pletion of the activity. Here too the effectiveness of the activity was represented via a five-point Likert-scale (1=least effective, 5=most effective) pertaining to the development of their 1) critical and (self)reflective skills, 2) communication skills, 3) academic writing skills, and 4) confidence as independent learners. Students were also asked to answer three open-ended questions about positive and problematic aspects of the activity and ways for future enhancement. Extra space was provided in the questionnaire for further comments.

Regarding the quantitative data obtained via the Likert-scale questions and with the aid of my diary, I used descriptive statistics to see if my expectations were met. As for the qualitative data, I analysed these by means of thematic analysis, which is a method with the purpose of identifying patterns or themes within the data allowing a rich description of the data set. I adopted the inductive approach and coded the data 'without trying to fit it into any pre-existing coding frames' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83). Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I first generated the initial codes by identifying segments of data that appeared significant. I then organized the codes into potential themes and reviewed and defined these themes. I identified three main thematic categories: positives (twenty-six sub-themes), challenges (twelve sub-themes), and recommendations for the future (ten sub-themes). In the following section I will discuss the most significant sub-themes within these three thematic categories.

Results of the evaluation

The independent observer's perspective

My colleague's feedback was very positive. She confirmed that the instructions for the innovative activity were communicated in a clear and intelligible manner, the learning objective was well formulated, and the group activity was well designed. In addition, she found the collective brainstorming activity on the characteristics of good feedback to be very effective.

The teacher's perspective

The data from the teaching diary confirmed the general improvement of student writing skills. The class's average score was 3.26 (out of five) at the first point of measurement (n=21) and 4.05 at the last point of measurement (n=18). In the case of thirteen out of twenty-one students (62 per cent), I recorded at least a progression of one-point on the scale. Of these thirteen students, six improved significantly. That is, their score increased by more than one point. The remaining eight out of the twenty-one students showed no significant sign of progress. However, 75 per cent of these students entered the course with an already higher level of writing skills as compared to the aforementioned students who progressed. For these students the average score was constantly around 4.25 (n=6) while students who progressed scored 4.00 at the last point of measurement (n=13). Thus, they had much less room to further develop their writing skills. By contrast, the writing skills of the other two non-progressing students were not only under-

developed compared to their peers but failed to show any progress. They failed to even submit the final essay and thus failed the course. While I cannot be certain why these students decided not to finish the course, a likely factor is that the innovation did not help them to either become independent learners nor to develop their writing skills.

The students' perspective

Students' views on the innovation also confirmed the improvement of their writing skills (hypothesis 1). When, at the end of the semester, they were asked about the impact of the innovation on their writing skills, the average score was 3.71 on a five-point scale (table 1). Their responses to the open-ended questions of both the minute papers and the final questionnaire provided further evidence that they thought the exercise was beneficial. Within the theme of positives, the improvement of their writing skills was the most significant sub-theme with thirty-one quotations. Students reported that they felt that they improved their papers by having become aware of the argumentative power that lies in providing examples to illustrate their ideas: 'I've found a very good example in the paper of my peer, and it's inspired me to also provide actual and interesting examples to illustrate my thoughts'. This is a crucial skill in sociological writing because it reflects the acquisition and evidence of more complex cognitive processes such as 'application', 'analysis', or 'evaluation' (Armstrong 2018).

Being inspired by papers of peers was also frequently (twenty-nine times) mentioned by students. For example, one student felt that peer papers helped in gaining new perspectives: 'It was certainly an inspiration to try to look at sociological concepts from various angles'. Being able to look at an issue from a new perspective contributes to the development of analytical skills and is especially important for sociologists who must always consider the diversity of standpoints of social actors (University of Calgary 2019).

Table 1. Student evaluation of the effectiveness of peer feedback in the final questionnaire on a five-point scale (n=17)

	Critical thinking	Writing skills	Communication skills	Confidence and independence
Mean Score	3.94	3.71	3.41	3.24
Standard deviation	0.83	1.12	1.15	1.16

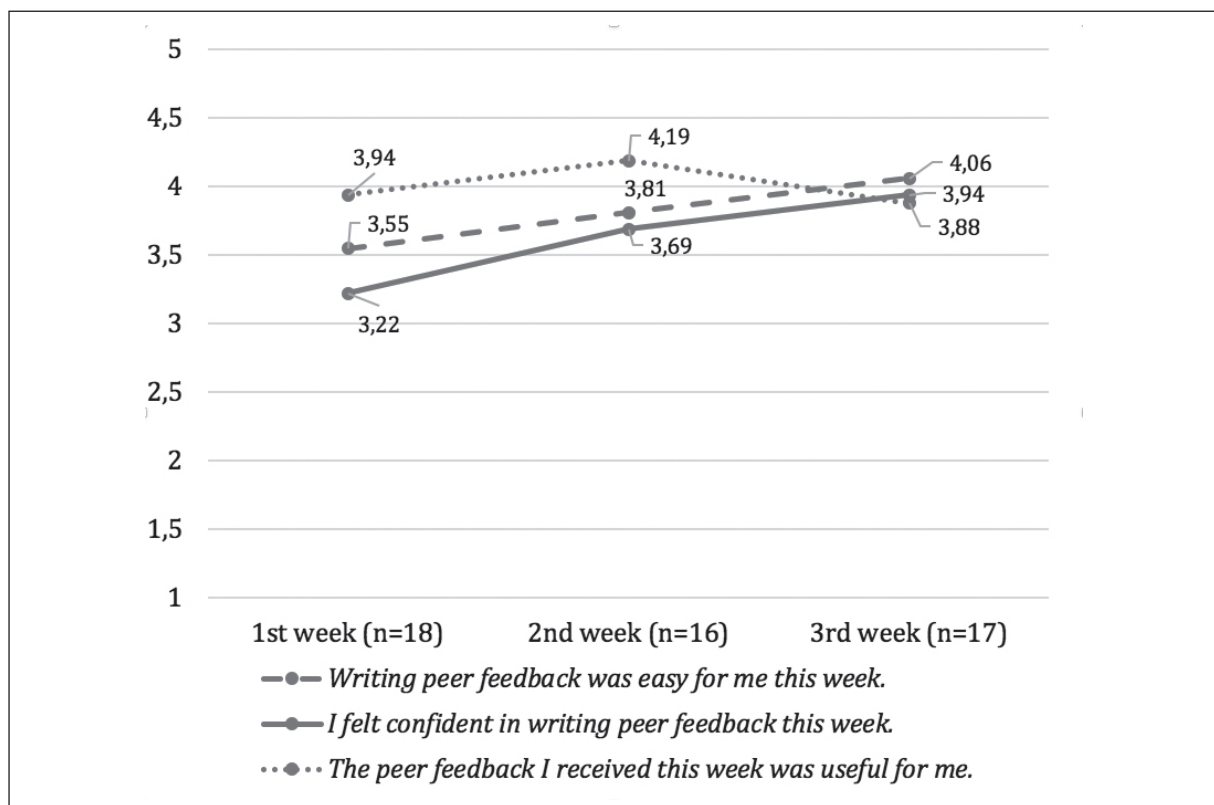
Critical and reflective skills are crucial to both good academic writing and becoming independent learners (hypothesis 2B). This sub-theme had fifteen quotations in the category of positives,

which shows that the innovation was most effective in this area as it received the highest mean ranking of 3.91 points on the five-point scale in the final questionnaire (table 1). Students described the improvement as ‘We could compare writing skills of peers and learned to be critical while being supportive of others’.

The expectation of enhancing peer cooperation (hypothesis 2C) was also confirmed and contributed to the positives of the innovation. Remarks about peer support appeared fifteen times as represented by the following quotations: ‘I think it was important to support each other and specifically focus on their improvement’ or ‘I liked the fact that the reviewers noticed what I tried to improve upon in my writing’. These quotations attest to the establishing of a collegial approach among peers but it was best expressed by a student who verbalized the following observation during class: ‘At one point I understood we are all colleagues who respect each other’. Hence, at least some of the students experienced a shift of identity toward becoming partners with teachers and peers and sharing the responsibility *for* and control *of* the learning process.

However, the development of students’ confidence in becoming independent learners is less straightforward (hypothesis 2A). In the final questionnaire students evaluated the impact of the innovation on their confidence as slightly above average (3.24 out of five see table 1), and in their minute papers they reported an overall increase – from 3.22 to 3.94 percentage points – in terms of their confidence over a timespan of three weeks (figure 1).

Figure 1. Student perspective on peer feedback based on weekly minute papers (five-point scale)



Concerning the difficulties associated with peer back, feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy about providing feedback became the most significant sub-theme of the category of challenges: students mentioned these twenty-four times in the questionnaire. As one student put it: 'I don't feel competent; the topic is not 100% clear to me (I am still in the process of learning) – that means I can't evaluate papers of others'. Besides a lack of proper understanding of the topic, I identified two other reasons for self-doubt to arise: feeling bad about criticizing others and having doubts about their own writing skills. In some cases, feelings of self-doubt about their own ability to provide peer feedback resulted in a lack of complete trust in peers' ability to write good feedback. Therefore, some recommended that the teacher should complement peer feedback. With five mentions, this was the most important sub-theme within the scope of future recommendations. To help them overcome their reservations about the exercise these comments suggest that it is important to explain to students before the activity commences that feedback is itself a way of learning rather than an expression of expertise.

Such a discussion, however, may not help on overcoming the related challenge of struggling with identifying weaknesses of seemingly perfect papers: 'It is difficult for me to find what can be improved, because there are, for sure, many mistakes in my own paper. It is easier to write purely positive feedback but that is not instructive enough'. Such an attitude may explain the decrease in the perceived usefulness of feedback in the third week of the activity (figure 1). As the quality of papers increased, it became harder for students to identify weaknesses and suggest improvements. Nevertheless, these troubles are understandable when taking into consideration that students are still in the process of acquiring the skill of critical thinking (Silva et al. 2016).

The last significant challenge for students emerged not from the content but from the context in which the exercises took place. On seventeen occasions they reported that making enough time available for the writing of the peer feedback was challenging. This may have been partly due to some inconveniently set deadlines, as students could only provide feedback over the weekend. When running the innovation again, I will consider setting either an earlier deadline for position papers or a later deadline for giving feedback.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed a teaching innovation aimed at developing independent learning and improving writing skills early on by introducing peer feedback to a writing-intensive introductory course in sociology. The innovation proved to be very effective in improving students' writing skills based on both teacher and student perspectives (hypothesis 1) whereas the development of independent learners was only partially confirmed (hypothesis 2). Student evaluations reflected their development in terms of critical thinking and reflective skills (hypothesis 2B) and peer cooperation (hypothesis 2C), but despite the recorded increase in confidence at the end of the course, students voiced self-doubt *during* the exercise (hypothesis 2A).

Struggles with self-doubt are most probably related to the shift of student identity in higher education (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2018). The peer feedback activity enabled students to become familiar with their new roles because it bestowed them control over the assessment and granted them responsibility. However, some students had reservations about their own competence or called for more teacher guidance. These students recognized the shift toward a more student-centred learning approach, but could not fully identify with their new role yet. In this respect, providing teacher feedback as well would be counterproductive because it would undermine their progression toward independent learning. Thus, a transitory period from teacher to peer feedback may be beneficial. In addition to my comments on the quality of peer feedback in general, I would consider providing individualized commentary on the first peer feedback assignment in the future.

As the above results indicate, the process of becoming independent learners may be very challenging for some first-year students and feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy may impede effective learning. Therefore, teachers should be very attentive to student performance and identify those students who lag behind their peers in becoming independent learners because these students are prone to fail the course and may eventually even discontinue their university studies. Becoming an independent learner is essential in higher education and its development should be addressed from the commencement of any academic discipline.

References

- Armstrong, P. (2018) 'Bloom's taxonomy', *Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University*, available at <https://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy>, accessed 14 February 2019.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3:2, pp. 77-101.
- Cook-Sather, A. and Abbot, S. (2016) 'Translating partnerships: how faculty-student collaboration in explorations of teaching and learning can transform perceptions, terms, and selves', *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 4:2, pp. 1-14.
- Hassel, S. and Ridout, N. (2018) 'An investigation of first-year students' and lecturers' expectations of university education', *Frontiers in Psychology* 8:2218, pp. 1-13.
- Mercer-Mapstone, L., Marquis, E. and McConnell, C. (2018) 'The 'partnership identity' in higher education: moving from 'us' and 'them' to 'we' in student-staff partnership', *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 2:1, pp. 12-29.
- Nicol, D., Thomson, A. and Breslin, C. (2014) 'Rethinking feedback practices in higher education: a peer review perspective', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 39:1, pp. 102-122.

Silva, H., Lopes, J., Dominguez, C., Payan-Carreira, R., Morais, E. and Nascimento, M.M. (2016) 'Fostering critical thinking through peer review between cooperative learning groups', *Revista Lusófona de Educação* 32:32, pp. 31-45.

University of Calgary (2019) *Sociology – a 21st century career*, available at <https://soci.ucalgary.ca/undergraduate/sociology-21st-century-career>, accessed 18 March 2019.

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK: final report*, York: The Higher Education Academy.



Alica Rétiová is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Her main research interest is the cultural sociology of social movements and political sociology. In her dissertation she studies the language of progressivists and traditionalists in the public debate regarding family rights in Slovakia. She has been a teaching assistant since 2015 for courses such as Introduction to Sociology and Contemporary Sociological Theory. She co-authored a guidebook for students on academic writing with Ivana Rapošová, the author of the third chapter of this book. She is currently also working as a researcher at the National Institute for Further Education under the auspices of the Czech Ministry of Education. Here she is involved in a project for the professional development of school teachers and principals. alica.reti@gmail.com