# To use or not to use? Understanding the connection between using peer and tutor feedback and self-regulated learning[1]

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## ABSTRACT

*Peer and tutor feedback can play a significant role in developing self-regulated learners. It is generally perceived that giving peer feedback is more useful to students. However, the extent to which peer feedback is used is relatively under-researched. This paper examines the use of peer and tutor feedback by undergraduate students. Data were collected qualitatively by means of a student questionnaire. The results show that most students passively and uncritically implemented all the tutor feedback, mostly because they regarded the tutor as the expert. However, the validity of feedback from peers was questioned and challenged, implying that more engagement occurred when implementing peer feedback than tutor feedback. The results suggest that although using tutor feedback may have resulted in better quality essays, using peer feedback led to more critical engagement with the feedback and in so doing enabled greater self-regulated learning.*

**Keywords:** feedback, peer/tutor review, higher education, assessment, self-regulated learning

## INTRODUCTION

Self-regulated learners play an active part in their own learning processes and are meta-cognitively aware, motivated students who adjust behaviours to achieve their goals (Butler & Winne, 1995; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). One way in which learners may become self-regulated is through peer feedback. Peer feedback, also referred to as peer review, is a reciprocal process that involves a student (or groups of students) providing feedback on the work of another student (or group of students), their peer (Ashenafi, 2015), and receiving feedback from their peer on their own work. Peer feedback may be differentiated from peer assessment which is defined as 'students grading the work or performance of their peers using relevant criteria' (Liu & Carless, 2006: 280). Peer feedback, when implemented as part of a drafting cycle, may be seen as a form of formative assessment that facilitates collaborative learning (Gielen et al., 2010) by providing students with the opportunity to learn from and with their peers. Therefore, by enabling meta-cognitive awareness about their own work in particular, and writing in general, peer feedback encourages students to become self-regulated learners (Liu & Carless, 2006; Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014; Patton, 2012; Hamer et al., 2015; Ion, Barrera-Corominas & Tomas-Folch, 2016).

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Feedback, in general, plays an important role in students' becoming self-regulated learners by serving as an external stimulus for internal development (Butler & Winne, 1995; Nicol & Macfarlane, Dick, 2006; Nicol et al., 2014). This is because feedback enables students to engage with the more knowledgeable other (MKO), that is someone who knows more about a specific topic or task (Vygotsky, 1978). The MKO could be either tutor and peer (Li, 2016). Moreover, from a social constructivism standpoint, peer feedback is ideally situated to enable students to develop and learn through collaboration with others (Butler & Winne, 1995; Vanderhoven et al., 2012; Li, 2016).

Peer feedback, specifically, is an opportunity to 'empower students and foster active learning' (Li, Liu & Steckelberg, 2010). However, generally, peer feedback is perceived to be more helpful to the giver than the receiver (Nicol et al., 2014; Lundstorm & Baker, 2009; Li et al., 2010). Walker (2015), for instance, found that students were better at providing feedback to their peers than in making use of the feedback provided to them. This is largely because students view giving feedback to their peers as a more active process that is more helpful at enabling them to become independent, self-regulated learners (Nicol et al., 2014). However, this paper argues that an understanding of the choices that students make in whether to use peer feedback are just as important for the facilitation and development of students' self-regulated learning and is worthy of further exploration.

The issue of using peer feedback – as opposed to giving peer feedback – is still relatively under-researched (Walker, 2015). Harland, Wald and Randhawa (2017) explored the use of peer and tutor feedback and required students to provide a rebuttal as to why a comment was accepted, partially accepted or rejected. However, the study did not actively consider the factors affecting the use or lack of use of peer feedback. Additionally, Walker (2015) speculated that the reason peer feedback is not always used may be related to the giver of the feedback rather than the feedback itself, while Zhao (2010) found that students were more likely to accept and use tutor feedback than peer feedback. Considering the factors that determine the use, or discarding, of feedback is especially important, as without any engagement with feedback, learning from feedback during the drafting process is limited (Vardi, 2012). This study, therefore, contributes to the growing literature on peer review by exploring the extent to which feedback was used for a writing task by undergraduate students and the factors that influenced whether students used the feedback from their peers. In addition, the study is extended to include students' perspectives on tutor feedback, in particular, the extent to which they used it and why.

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

*Research context:* This research was conducted in an academic development context at a university in South Africa. This university is a historically disadvantaged university that draws most of its student population from lower socio-economic groups. In general, academic development courses in South Africa are part of the higher education plan to increase throughput rates. The academic development course in this study, called English for Educational Development (EED), is compulsory in some disciplines in the University's Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (CHS). The teaching and learning approach used in EED is in keeping with the academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 2006: 368) which is concerned 'with meaning making, identity, power and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what "counts" as knowledge in any particular academic context'. In order to facilitate this process, the different CHS disciplines have their EED lectures and tutorials separately, allowing for the inclusion of more subject-specific literacy practices into the course.

One of the assessment tasks in EED is the writing of an argumentative essay. Throughout the course, the process approach to writing is followed whereby students go through the stages of brainstorming, mind mapping, drafting and re-drafting before submitting their final essay. The drafting and re-drafting stages of the writing process include structured opportunities for students to engage with the peer and tutor feedback

processes. Researchers (Quinn, 1999, Vardi, 2012) concur that these processes can help students learn the appropriate conventions in their disciplines, as well as begin the process of being initiated into the culture of the university as a whole. To assist students through the writing process, students are given a rubric and a rubric checklist. These tools make the lecturer's expectations of the task explicit and both tools are discussed at length in the lecture. In addition, students are encouraged to use these tools to guide them through their writing.

The drafting stage of the writing process involves feedback from peers, as well as feedback from the tutors. The peer-review process occurs in a tutorial period and students play the role of both assessor (reviewer) and assessee (reviewee) (Li et al., 2010), as they give feedback on another student's essay and receive feedback on their own essay in the same period. During the period, students swop their essays with one another; students may choose to do so with the person sitting next to them or more randomly. They then read through the essay and provide written feedback on the essay. To aid students through this process, they are encouraged to use both the rubric and rubric checklist. In addition, to ensure that students do not go through the process in a mechanical fashion, each student reviewer is given a reviewer sheet with a set of questions related to the essay to answer.

Some questions include: 'Does the introduction provide sufficient background information for the reader? Yes/No.; What suggestions would you give the writer to improve the introduction?; Does the writer have sub-claims? Yes/No. Briefly list them.; Does the writer consider counter-arguments? Yes/No. State one counter-argument.; and Provide suggestions on how the writer could improve his/her essay'. Gielen et al. (2010) suggest that feedback quality could be raised through the use of such directed questions. After students work through each other's essays, the reviewer sheet is handed back to the reviewee together with the essay. After reading through the feedback provided by their peers, students are given time in the tutorial to consult with the reviewer for clarity and further explanations on the feedback received. Thereafter, students have a week in which to revise their essay and submit it to their tutors. The tutors provide students with detailed constructive feedback, which is aimed at developing students' higher-level thinking rather than focusing on surface errors. When the essays are returned to students, an entire tutorial is dedicated for them to go through the feedback to rework their essay, with the assistance of the tutor. The final essay is submitted a week later with both drafts (peer and tutor) attached.

*Research Methodology:* The overall aim of this research was to establish the extent to which peer and tutor feedback was used for a writing task as well as the reasons students chose to use some feedback and not others. As such, the research questions addressed are:

- How much of the peer and tutor feedback was implemented?

- What are the factors that play a role in determining whether students use and/or not use peer and tutor feedback?

- Are there differences in the factors that determine whether students make use of peer and tutor feedback?

Since the above questions relate to students' opinions on tutor and peer feedback, a qualitative research design was found suitable to answer the above questions. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative research allows for the in-depth examination of opinions, beliefs, and emotions of people in particular settings.

*Participants:* The participants in this research were 35 first-year undergraduate CHS students registered for the EED course. These 35 students were from one CHS discipline. There was a mixture of English First Language and English Additional Language speakers.

*Data collection:* Data were collected by means of a student questionnaire which was designed to elicit student responses to the peer-review and tutor-review processes. The questionnaires were handed out by the tutors after the final essay had been submitted. The questionnaire consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions. For the purposes of this paper, the following question on the questionnaire was used: How much of the peer feedback was implemented? Students had to choose from the options: all, most, some or none. They also had to provide an explanation for their answer. The same question was asked about tutor feedback.

*Data Analysis:* An initial data analysis was done by the first researcher who grouped student responses according to the option they chose (i.e. all, most, some or none). These were counted and recorded. Their explanation as to why they chose a particular option was read. During this reading, the key words and phrases were highlighted, searching for thematic similarities and differences in responses. Next, the second researcher analysed the data in a similar manner as the first researcher and also captured the data in table form. Two tables were constructed: one for the peer feedback and one for the tutor feedback. The two data sets, derived from the work of the first and second researchers, were then discussed and confirmed by the both researchers.

*Ethical Considerations:* This research followed the ethical guidelines provided by the University. In particular, ethical clearance was obtained from the University for the research to be conducted and students signed a consent form giving their permission for their responses to be used anonymously. To ensure anonymity, the questionnaires were assigned a random alphanumerical code during analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Peer feedback*

The extent to which peer feedback was implemented

A total of 35 students completed the questionnaire. Students were asked how much of the peer-review feedback they used and were given four options to choose from, i.e. all, most, some, and none. While all 35 students indicated that they made use of the feedback given by their peers, the extent to which they used the feedback varied. A total of 12 (34%) students indicated that they used all the feedback, while 13 (37%) said that they used most of the feedback, and 10 (29%) indicated that they used some of the feedback. No student indicated that they used 'none' of the feedback.

*Factors that influence students' use of peer feedback*

Although the students indicated varying extents to which they used feedback (see above), the reasons for using all, most, or some of the feedback tended to be quite similar with the analysis pointing to four main factors that influenced whether students used peer feedback comments. These included the perceived relevance and usefulness of the feedback, agreement (or disagreement) with the reviewer, the clarity and ease of the feedback given, and the perceived quality and accuracy of the feedback given. Although there may be some overlap between these broad factors, we will discuss them individually.

*1. Perceived relevance and usefulness of the feedback:* For most of the students, a big determiner for whether feedback should be used is the perceived relevance or usefulness of the feedback. If they felt that the comment would help improve their essay, they would be more willing to implement it. The 12 students who mentioned that they used all the peer feedback regarded the feedback they received as being useful and constructive. For instance, some student quotes include:

> I implemented all the peer review feedback because they were constructive criticism which helped me identify ways to improve my essay. (B8)

and

> I did a lot of mistakes on my assignment therefore needed to fix them by starting afresh and the review really helped me figure out my mistakes. (A1)

In determining what is considered to be 'useful', a growing development of metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning emerging in the students' responses are noted as is reflected in the following quote:

> I used the grammatical help and some suggestions about linking paragraphs, but not all recommendations were taken into consideration. (B9)

Responses like the one above may indicate that these students did not go through the process in a mechanical fashion but gave thought to the comments made by the reviewer; in other words, they engaged with the process and, only after weighing the validity of the comments, made changes to their essay, thereby facilitating the learning process. Similarly, Nicol et al. (2014: 113) points out that peer review 'offers great promise as a method through which students might develop their capabilities as independent and self-regulated learners'. This is evident in some student responses: some indicated that in the process of looking at the reviewer feedback they were able to spot their own mistakes and make adjustments accordingly.

In contrast to engaging with the feedback, one student wrote:

> The feedback I got from the peer-review demanded changes therefore I had to make all the changes where my flaws were pointed out. (C5)

In this instance, it appears as if this student felt almost 'forced' to address all the changes. This could lead to mechanistic behaviour which may result in limited or no learning, which could possibly negate one of the many benefits of the peer-review process, especially since peer review plays an important role in student learning and development (Vickerman, 2009).

Moreover, the process of engaging with other students' work can help 'students become more detached and critical about their own work' (Hamer et al., 2015: 151). In the present study, for instance, students used their own work as a basis for comparison in the process. For example:

> I did consider my peer feedback a little bit because the person who reviewed my essay was comparing it to hers. I was not going to take all of her feedback because I did not want our essays to be similar … (C4)

Although the point raised above about not wanting their essays to be similar may be attributed to a concern about possible plagiarism, it shows, more importantly, that the student is aware of what her essay is doing and how it is similar or not to the other essay. In other words, the student was able to take ownership of her essay and did not uncritically accept and implement all the peer feedback.

*2. Agreement (or disagreement) with the reviewer:* Another factor that greatly determined whether students used the feedback was the extent to which they were in agreement with the suggestions made by the reviewers:

> I implemented all the feedback because I found that the points made were true, and I needed to improve on some of the things in the feedback. (B6)

All of the feedback received during the peer-review process was valid and helped a lot… (B14)

and

I did implement some of my peer review feedback because I noticed my peer was right about the mistakes I did. (A4)

However, some of the students who said that they used most or only some of the peer feedback indicated that they were not in total agreement with the reviewer and that some of the feedback was not useful:

Some of the feedback was to shorten my paragraphs… I preferred my paragraphs that way. (B13)

and

I thought most of the feedback was useful but some of it wasn't helpful. (B15)

In these instances, the level of agreement or disagreement with what the peer reviewer has said suggests growing confidence in, and awareness of, the strengths of their writing. This points to one of the benefits of taking part in the peer-review process; namely, it enables students to take a step back from their own writing and gain a greater understanding of what makes 'good' writing (Nicol et al., 2014; Lundstorm & Baker, 2009).

*3. Clarity and ease of feedback.* Another factor that seemed to affect whether students used the feedback was how understandable the feedback is and, concomitantly, how easy it is to implement the feedback. To this end, many students referred to the correction of surface features as indicated by the following response:

I implemented all because I made mistakes by writing with small letters and I used abbreviations, so the peer review helped me to rectify those mistakes. (A5)

Although such feedback is superficial and lacks quality and depth, students generally find it easier to address as correcting these errors are not cognitively demanding. Similarly, Gao, Schunn and Yu (2019) found that students tend to address less demanding problem areas.

The next example further illustrates how students were more likely to implement the feedback if they knew what was required of them and if the feedback was easy to implement:

The feedback was useful and easy to understand because she explained everything to me… (B12)

In this instance, students' understanding of the peer feedback was additionally facilitated by allocating time in class for the reviewer and reviewee to discuss the feedback. Creating such spaces within the classroom enables feedback to be viewed as a dialogue rather than unidirectional and immutable (Hamer et al., 2015; Boud & Molloy, 2013). Additionally, Hamer et al. (2015) explain that during peer review, students take on several roles. They are first authors of their own work, then assessors where they are expected to read their peers' work, form opinions and produce feedback. They are also receivers of feedback, which requires making decisions on whether to use the feedback advice given. Clearly then, providing space in the classroom for discussions between the reviewer and reviewee will assist students in making such decisions.

Interestingly, only one student indicated that he did not understand the feedback:

I implemented some because there is some feedback, I did not thoroughly understand… (A10)

In this instance, it is possible that the challenge may have been on how to address the feedback rather than an understanding of what the feedback required. It could be conjectured that the changes that the student did implement may have been ones that focused on surface errors, for example, punctuation, typing and spelling errors, and concerns about the length or organisation of paragraphs, which, as mentioned earlier, are always easier to work through as opposed to content knowledge which is cognitively more demanding. This again highlights the importance of both clarity and ease of feedback in determining which ones get used.

*4. Quality and accuracy of the feedback:* The last factor that determined whether students engaged with the feedback was the perceived quality of the feedback. While students appreciated that the feedback given helped improve their essays, there were some students who had higher expectations of the peer-review process as illustrated by the following quotes:

I did not feel that the feedback I received was very constructive. The peer mostly commented on grammar and not where I was lacking in terms of the sections and what I could incorporate to enhance it. (A7)

and

It is because my peer only said beautiful comments about my essay but didn't realise that there are things that were not there and a lot of mistakes to be fixed. (A6)

This is similar to Gao et al. (2019) who found that peer feedback tended to focus on less demanding problems. In the current study, this might be because, despite the rubric, checklist and worksheet, students did not have sufficient understanding of what to look for when giving feedback, or perhaps they lacked the necessary confidence. Additionally, the accuracy of the feedback also influenced whether students used the feedback. For example, one student said:

Some of the feedback or edits on my essay were not exactly correct, in that the grammar correction was wrong or she misunderstood what I was saying in the essay. (C4)

As other studies have shown (see, for example, Liu & Carless, 2006; Gielen et al., 2010), the quality and accuracy of peer feedback (especially in comparison with tutor feedback) are a general concern about the peer-review process. In this instance, however, the quality and accuracy of the comments may have been due to other factors. Forming opinions and generating feedback is a cognitively demanding task (Hamer et al., 2015) and a student who is disadvantaged by linguistic issues – as is the case in the current study – may experience difficulties in providing feedback that is deemed adequate or valuable. It could also be that the reviewer did not have the 'expertise' to suggest changes and therefore felt that the essay was good or it could just be that the reviewer did not want to disappoint the writer. Whatever the case, these issues could result in a student potentially losing confidence in the peer-review process.

Of note is that although other studies have claimed that students may be hesitant to accept feedback from their peers due to a lack of perceived authority in the peer reviewer (see, for example, Geilen et al., 2010; Walker, 2015), in the current study, this did not appear to be the case. Instead, students' reluctance to accept feedback seemed to stem not from the giver but the feedback itself, as well as from students having a different vision for their essay. This suggests that students are taking ownership of their work rather than not trusting the peer reviewer, *per se*. We therefore see a critical engagement with and 'weighing up' of peer feedback and not just blind acceptance.

*Tutor feedback*

The extent to which tutor feedback was implemented

A total of 34 students completed the tutor feedback section. Twenty-four (71%) students indicated they used all the feedback, six (18%) said they used most of the feedback and four (11%) said they only used some of the feedback. As with the peer feedback, no student indicated that they used 'none' of the feedback.

Factors that influence students' use of tutor feedback

As with peer feedback, the use of tutor feedback was also influenced by issues of clarity and understandability. For instance:

> I did not fully understand the last part so I did not change it/write more about it as she had previously suggested. (B2)

and

> I struggled to read what was written and I was unable to fix some of [my] mistakes. (C8)

However, the greatest and most prevailing factor that influenced whether students used tutor feedback was the implicit confidence and trust students had in their tutors' abilities and expertise, and, therefore, the students felt that they should heed the advice of their tutors in order to improve the quality of their work:

> I attempted to incorporate all my tutor's feedback, to ensure I improve the quality of my work submitted. (A9)

These students reported that the tutor feedback was useful as the tutor pointed out exact errors:

> The feedback I received from my tutor was very helpful. It provided me with new ways of doing or looking at things. It showed me which areas of the assignment I was slacking in and what I could do to improve it. (A7)

Some students used all the feedback provided by their tutors because they 'look up to their tutors' as indicated by the following quote:

> My tutor is more knowledgeable than I am in the English reading/writing aspect. This is why I chose to accept and learn from all my mistakes so that I may increase my knowledge also. (A9)

It appears that the mere fact of viewing the tutor as the 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) and the authority figure may have resulted in corrections being passively attended to which limits learning as reflected by the following quote:

> Each point the tutor underlined I have tried to improve it and all mistakes were manipulated. (A3)

This is similar to Patton (2012: 724) who pointed out that 'students demonstrated a very high level of investment in the expertise of their tutors' which was reflected in the way that students were more willing to accept the feedback from their tutors than they did of their peers. Similarly, Zhao (2010) in an investigation of learners' use and understanding of peer and teacher feedback on writing found that learners used more teacher feedback and that there was a passive acceptance of teacher feedback.

*Differences in the factors that determine whether students make use of peer and tutor feedback*

The same questions were asked for the peer and tutor evaluation (see methodology section). More students indicated that they used all of the tutor feedback (71%) than all of the peer feedback (34%). As seen from

above, the main reason for this seems to lie in the perceived and accepted expertise of the tutor (perceived to be above that of the peer), which resulted in an almost automatic acceptance and implementation of the tutor feedback. In contrast, the validity of peer feedback was questioned more. This could have resulted in students checking and confirming the validity of the feedback given by their peers against the rubric or rubric checklist, suggesting a greater critical engagement with the process, which could possibly have resulted in the internalisation of the assessment criteria thereby enhancing learning which would more likely be transferred to other learning contexts. This appears not to have been the case when implementing tutor feedback. Similar findings were reported by Yang, Badger and Yu (2006), who found that although students were more active in questioning and confirming the feedback they received from their peers, they tended to make more use of the feedback received from their teachers. Yang et al. (2006) imply that student questioning/confirming of peer comments is as a result of lack of trust. However, another point of consideration for the students questioning their peer feedback and not the tutor feedback could be that they considered their peer as their equal and felt comfortable with them, and, therefore, did not hesitate to question the feedback that they received, while also being aware that challenging their peers' feedback will not result in any negative consequences.

For the majority of the students, it almost seemed as though there was a passive acceptance of the tutor feedback as the tutor was regarded as the expert. The lack of questioning of tutor feedback may have led to students attending to corrections in a mechanistic manner which does not help in facilitating the learning process although the end product may be improved. However, it may also be that students felt that not improving their essays according to the suggestions made by the tutor, i.e. failure to take into account tutors' suggestions, may compromise their final mark and, therefore, felt forced to attend to all the tutor feedback. Whatever the case, working through feedback without critically engaging with it does not enhance learning. Students' critical engagement with their peer feedback, as noted in the current study, should be viewed as a positive factor as it shows growing development of their metacognition skills and taking ownership of their own work, which ultimately leads to greater self-regulated learning (Ion et al., 2016).

It was also noted that with peer feedback, students mostly made reference to the surface-level feedback that they received which was not the case with tutor feedback. This is understandably so because students are still 'non experts' in the field. Regardless of this – as it was pointed out earlier – the peer-review process provided students with the opportunity to compare their essays with the essays they had to review, thereby giving them a different perspective on how to address the question. This may have helped them improve their own essay. These findings are different from that of Yang et al. (2006) who report that peer feedback led to more changes in meaning of students' writing while the teacher feedback led to more surface changes. In the current study, while this point could not be verified because the writing tasks were not assessed after the peer-review process, it did appear as though – from students' responses of what feedback they did and did not use – that the peer-review process resulted in surface changes while the tutor feedback resulted in more substantial changes. However, greater deliberations occurred during the peer-review process.

In conclusion, then, the results from the study suggest that the choices students make regarding whether to use peer feedback or the extent to which they use peer feedback may reflect their development as self-regulated learners. That is, the process of deciding whether to use feedback reflects their taking an active part in their learning and writing.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the study is situated in a particular context, the results point to a few practical implications and recommendations for feedback in general, and for peer feedback specifically. Firstly, the results from this

study suggest that the factors that influence whether, and to what extent, students engage with their peer feedback are suggestive of their becoming self-regulated learners by showing metacognitive awareness of their writing and taking ownership thereof. In contrast, the almost passive acceptance of tutor feedback may be less conducive to this kind of development. These results therefore point to the importance of the peer-feedback process in enabling the development of self-regulated learners (Liu & Carless, 2006; Ion et al., 2016). Additionally, since self-regulated learning develops over a period of time (Butler and Winne, 1995), it has implications for classroom practice, which talks to the next point.

Secondly, related to the above, the results of this study also point to the importance of including peer review in a more deliberate manner. For the most part, peer review has been introduced in an *ad hoc* manner and is not always integrated into course design (Patton, 2012; Ashenafi, 2015). As this study shows, including peer feedback as an active component in the assessment schedule may ultimately be advantageous to students, above and beyond merely receiving and engaging with tutor feedback.

Lastly, the results have implications for training purposes. For the most part, the emphasis has been on training students how to give feedback (see, for example, Gielen et al., 2010; Patton, 2012) rather than how to use it. Training to improve the peer-feedback process should therefore also include how to best make use of feedback, as this may ensure that both giving and receiving feedback are beneficial parts of the process. Moreover, taking cognisance of the factors that determine why student use feedback could, for example, emphasise that an understanding of the feedback during the implementation process is a critical step in student learning as opposed to passive acceptance and implementation.

## LIMITATIONS

A few limitations to the study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the data collected are limited to the questionnaires; a more detailed response would likely have been received had interviews with the students also been used. Secondly, the lack of use of both sets of drafts and the feedback on them meant that we had to rely on students' responses to questionnaires. Nevertheless, this enabled an initial exploration into the factors that affect the use, or not, of peer feedback. Future and follow-up studies could include interviews as well as data from the actual drafting processes.

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