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Embedding Feedback in Self-Directed Learning: Distance Students' Active Engagement During Academic Writing[1]

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Abstract

Globally, many students struggle to develop academic writing skills. This challenge is heightened in distance education, where students are expected to be self-directed. Feedback has the potential to support students' development when they actively engage with it. However, feedback is often underutilised and not explicitly embedded in models of self-directed learning (SDL). This study explored how distance students engaged with feedback during academic writing, using a revised SDL framework that integrates feedback as a cyclical and intentional component. Drawing on social constructivism and participatory action research, the study involved 10 South African student teachers and employed content and document analysis, open-ended questionnaires, and a semi-structured interview. Findings show that personalised, dialogic feedback enhanced students' ability to identify learning needs, reflect critically, and take ownership of their learning process. The revised SDL feedback model contributed to deeper learner engagement, greater autonomy, and more reflective academic practice.

Keywords: feedback literacy, academic writing, distance education, self-directed learning, learner autonomy, reflective practice

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Introduction

English proficiency is an important global phenomenon. In South Africa, a multilingual country, English is mostly used as the language of learning and teaching in basic and tertiary education. Therefore, it is critical that students can converse academically in English. Academic writing is complex and often difficult for students to master. Developing a skill such as academic writing might prove even more challenging for distance students, who need to be self-directed. Feedback could serve as a valuable resource in assisting distance students to develop their academic writing skills. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore distance students' reflections on their active engagement with feedback on academic writing. Furthermore, the research aimed to explore whether students engaged more critically with feedback when integrated as a core component of the self-directed learning (SDL) process. This article first situates the research within the South African language and educational context. Then, the literature is explored to elaborate on key concepts contributing to this research such as feedback, the needs of distance students, and the SDL process. The research process is then explained, followed by the findings of the research, and our suggestions for future research.

The Role of English Globally and in South African Education

Preparing students to use English academically, professionally, and socially should be a priority in South African education. Trilling and Fadel (2009) highlighted that helping students contribute meaningfully to the workplace and society is a major 21st-century challenge. The University of Winnipeg (2022) reported that 142 countries include English as a mandatory part of education policy, while only 41 treat it as optional—highlighting English's global importance. Al-Khalil (2017) noted that English is increasingly the medium of instruction in higher education worldwide. In South Africa, English dominates as the language of learning and teaching at tertiary institutions, with some also offering Afrikaans (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). This requires students to read, write, and speak English across subjects, making cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) essential for academic success. For future English teachers—like those in the current study—an even higher level of proficiency and understanding is expected. Harmse and Evans (2017) defined CALP as a demanding form of literacy developed through formal learning and analysis. Academic settings require students to write, argue, and synthesise information using this advanced language. A study with Grades 8 and 9 South African learners showed that 28% weren't exposed to English at home, and 18% not even in social settings (Harmse & Evans, 2017). This lack of exposure affects even basic interpersonal communication skills, let alone CALP, which takes sustained effort to develop. The absence of CALP is often reflected in undergraduate writing.

Writing Skills of Undergraduate Students in South Africa

Motlhaka (2020) noted that many students, especially those who speak Indigenous South African languages like isiZulu or isiXhosa, struggle with academic writing. Literature shows that second-language writing differs significantly from first-language writing, which is often modelled at home. Pineteh (2014) added that despite academic writing being key to tertiary success, students often lack CALP. In his study of second-year students and lecturers at a South African university, students reported they came from under-resourced schools where skills like argumentation, referencing, and critical thinking weren't taught. Lecturers, in turn, described grading essays as a nightmare due to the volume of errors (Pineteh, 2014). There is thus a clear gap between expected academic writing standards and the skills students bring from high school. Reyneke (2016) pointed out that secondary education is driven by high-stakes exams that push teaching to focus on test preparation rather than critical thinking. Mokoena (2019) supported this, noting that rote learning still dominates, hindering students' development of analytical skills. As a result, many tertiary students lack the cognitive tools needed for higher education. This highlights the need for supportive lecturers—especially challenging in distance education, where physical separation adds another barrier.

The Context of Distance Education in the Current Study

Pursuing a degree via distance learning is a tall order because students are expected to become independent thinkers and autonomous, self-directed learners. This is a challenge for students who have not been exposed to critical thinking and active learning in their secondary education. The current study was conducted with distance students who were studying to become English teachers at a higher education institution in South Africa. Distance learning in this context is not made up of online learning that is completely asynchronous, but allows for online interaction among lecturers and students, as well as peer interaction. Considering this, feedback plays an important role not only to establish a relationship between lecturer and students, and among students, but also in guiding students towards skills development and autonomy. Thus, feedback serves as a way for students to be active agents towards improved learning, ultimately leading to social change in the education environment. In the context of the current study, the distance students at this institution were full- or part-time employees and diverse in terms of age, gender, and geographical location—calling for individualised feedback to meet each student's unique learning needs and styles.

The Context of Feedback in the Current Study

Jönsson (2013) stated that for feedback to be effective, students should use it in a meaningful way. Thus, students should be viewed as active agents in the feedback process and not as passive recipients of teacher-centred feedback. Unfortunately, the literature proves that students do not use the feedback they receive, consequently not realising its potential for enhancing learning. On the other hand, students are not always provided with opportunities to engage with and act on feedback (Carless, 2018), highlighting the importance of feedback literacy for both lecturers and students. Carless and Boud (2018) mentioned that ongoing student and teacher discontent with feedback processes requires alternative approaches to the kinds of interventions used for feedback. Evans (2013) emphasised that there is a growing need for research studies focusing on how students make sense of and respond to feedback. This study aimed to promote educational change, ultimately leading to social change by exploring students' engagement with feedback towards improved writing.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Feedback

Carless and Boud (2018) asserted that exposing students to various forms of feedback could enhance their feedback literacy. Hyland and Hyland (2019) said that in the process approach to writing, feedback includes a form of oral communication instead of just written comments. This also encourages the notion of multi-way communication as opposed to unilateral comments. Furthermore, Harland et al. (2016) expressed that peer feedback could assist students to think critically and analytically about the work. Thus, feedback can vary in terms of how it is provided (verbally, in writing, or typed text) and in terms of who provides the feedback. Along with this, feedback can also take on different foci. For example, feedback can be provided on merely the specific task at hand, the understanding of content knowledge, more general skills such as argumentation and reasoning, or on learning and decision-making as a whole. Van Boekel et al. (2023) explained four purposes of feedback:

- task feedback, which focuses on what is necessary to succeed at a particular task (e.g. "remove this" or "add a source here")
- process feedback, which emphasises strategies and skills that could be transferred to future tasks (e.g. "use logical connectors to connect your paragraphs" or "incorporate persuasive writing techniques into this section")
- self-regulation feedback, which aims to empower the student to self-assess and to encourage further investigation (e.g. "link this argument to your thesis statement, like you do in the previous

paragraph" or "it seems as if you are arguing that these external factors trigger defence systems. Is this what you mean?")

- self/praise feedback, which is feedback directed at the student, but not at the task (e.g. "your writing is excellent" and "well done").

Van Boekel et al. warned against relying too much on task-based feedback because such feedback might not necessarily be useful to students for subsequent tasks or learning. Moreover, focusing only on the task at hand could discourage students from exploring underlying reasons and strategies for their performance (Van Boekel et al., 2023). Thus, process feedback is more effective than task feedback because it provides guidance on how to develop a skill that is needed for the current and future tasks (Van Boekel et al., 2023).

Aligned with this, Wiggins (2012) explained that feedback is not mere advice or guidance, but information on how we are progressing towards a certain goal. Thus, feedback cannot be equated to a value judgement but should be viewed in the context of assessment for learning, which should lead to an improved understanding and application of what has been learned and where that places one on the path to reaching one's learning goals. Nasri et al. (2022) described sustainable feedback as feedback practices that recognise the student as a central agent in their learning by acknowledging feedback as an element in the process of learning instead of a mechanism to control expected learning outcomes. Nasri et al. also stated that although students receive feedback on their learning, they should also act as feedback providers on the educator's teaching approaches, highlighting feedback as a dialogic or even multi-way communicative process. Moreover, for feedback to be sustainable, learners should be able to use feedback from the teacher, peers, and self-generation as an ongoing process of developing their skills (Carless, 2013). Thus, feedback is an essential process during distance students' skills development.

The Needs of Distance Students

Shearer et al. (2020) argued that online learning approaches need rethinking, with greater focus on the student experience rather than just content delivery, assessments, and basic discussions. They stressed the importance of understanding the complex pedagogy of online distance education and designing learning experiences that meet learners' needs. Effective distance education depends largely on the interaction and connection between educators and students. Kara et al. (2019) also highlighted that distance students often feel isolated, making communication and interaction crucial. Feedback, as noted by Rapanta et al. (2020), acts as a key form of interaction in distance learning, since spontaneous conversations aren't always possible. Arinto (2013) added that the need for individualised feedback is even greater in distance settings, as it bridges the interaction gap. Shikulo's (2018) study supports this, with participants emphasising the importance of detailed, personalised feedback. Murphy et al. (2011) similarly

found that both students and tutors in a distance learning context rated timely, clear, and individualised feedback as essential. Rapanta et al. (2020, p. 931) further described individualised feedback as a "powerful learning engine" in distance education.

In a study by Fidalgo et al. (2020), about half of the distance students said they needed to improve how they managed their learning by setting goals and planning. This suggests students are aware of the need for SDL, but may not have developed those skills, especially if not taught earlier in their education. Shearer et al. (2020) also noted that students idealised a learning environment where they could take charge of their own learning, which Rapanta et al. (2020) reinforced by naming autonomy as a top factor for effective distance learning. Therefore, students should be given opportunities to practise autonomy and make learning-related decisions. Overall, these are three prominent needs of distance students relevant to this study: a strong need for interaction and communication (often through feedback); a preference for detailed, individualised feedback; and the need for self-direction and opportunities to practise autonomous learning.

Challenges With Feedback

Although effective feedback is essential, several factors hinder its delivery and interpretation. In a study of 13 American college students, Du (2013) found that feedback was often seen as insufficient or confusing. Similarly, South African first-year university students reported that the feedback they received didn’t help improve their learning because they often didn’t understand the comments (Strydom, 2019). This could stem from the high level of support in South African secondary schools, which contrasts with the SDL expected in tertiary education. Another issue is that students may lack the skills to interpret and use feedback effectively—what Van Boekel et al. (2023, p. 3391) referred to as “poor feedback literacy.”

Boud and Molloy (2012) argued that while educators may initiate feedback, students must also take active steps in the process. They challenged the view that feedback is simply one-way communication from teacher to learner. This misunderstanding is evident in Taole’s (2022) study of four South African multigrade primary school teachers who saw feedback as a one-off task rather than an interactive process involving learners. Without engaging critically with feedback, students are likely to find it ineffective. Boud and Molloy (2012) also noted that educators often overlook feedback from students that can provide insight into both student understanding and teaching practices. Educators must remain open to student feedback and be willing to adjust their methods when needed. If feedback is seen only as a grading tool, it won’t offer the guidance students need (Boud & Molloy, 2012). This one-way view is common in South African schools, where feedback is often limited to correcting errors and awarding marks (Taole, 2022). Carless et al. (2011) added that brief, final written comments lack the engagement needed for effective

learning. Given that the goal of feedback is to help students become active participants in their learning, both educators and students should treat feedback as a collaborative process for developing lasting skills.

Feedback in the SDL Process

The purpose of the current study was to explore students' engagement with feedback as part of the SDL process. According to Kreonidou and Kazamia (2019), feedback is an integral part of pedagogy in distance education and a tool students use to take ownership of their learning. This denotes that feedback is a resource that should be used to develop SDL skills towards improved learning. However, feedback is not an explicitly evident component of SDL when exploring its definitions (the definitions of SDL, that is). The following five steps have been coined by Knowles (1975) to define SDL and is still the most popular definition and understanding of what SDL entails: firstly, students should identify the gaps in their learning; secondly, students should formulate learning goals to address the learning gaps; thirdly, students should select resources to meet their learning goals; fourthly, students should identify learning strategies; and lastly, students should evaluate whether they have met their learning goals. As is evident from these steps, feedback could be assumed to play an important role in some of these SDL steps (e.g. identifying one's learning gaps and selecting resources for learning). However, it might be challenging for students to know where feedback fits into the SDL process and how it should be used to advance their SDL skills. One of the findings of the current study revealed how feedback fits into the SDL process.

Research design

Philosophical Orientation

This study was underpinned by social constructivism, which emanates from the view that meaning is created in collaboration with others (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Consequently, meaningful learning takes place when individuals interact and engage with others because "learning is a social process" (Amineh & Asl, 2015, p. 11). This theory rightly underpins our study because there was continual interaction and collaboration between students and their lecturer and among students as a group. The purpose of the interaction was to gain insight into how students engage with feedback to improve their academic writing. This links closely to participatory action research (PAR), which requires participants' active involvement throughout the research process.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed PAR. The qualitative research approach allowed the researchers to understand the experiences and perspectives of the research participants (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Participants were expected to follow the SDL steps on a website during their writing processes, with feedback added as an integral step (this process will henceforth be referred to as the SDL feedback

framework). Each participant's experience with the SDL feedback framework was explored. Students' active involvement in meaning-making about their learning processes—through reflections on their own decisions that they could adapt for future learning—aligns with the view that knowledge generation is a collaborative process in which each participant's engagement and contributions during the research process were critical to the envisaged outcome: effective feedback practices to promote academic writing. Although PAR was not initially the methodology decided on for the study, it became apparent throughout the research process that the feedback cycles the students engaged in aligned closely with PAR. This study required distance students' direct involvement in the assessment and learning process with participants' active contributions during the feedback cycles at the heart of the research. Aligned with PAR principles, Carless (2018) noted that feedback is characterised as a social process influenced by engagement with other people.

This notion of learning as a social experience where one attempts, with others, to bring about change, was also highlighted by Bradbury et al. (2019). They explained that in educational terms, action research means conducting research with the aim of changing a classroom or system towards improved learning. Our study aimed to promote students' SDL through active involvement in the feedback process. The process involved drawing on the resources of all participants in addressing the needs of the community in question, in this case, third- and fourth-year students and their lecturer. PAR stems from the understanding that knowledges are multiple, and that those who have been excluded from knowledge generation need to be active participants in the research process. Instead of excluding students from the feedback process, which traditionally has been nothing more than grading and comments from an educator, the PAR approach implemented in this study allowed for student engagement that, as stated by Gibbs et al. (2016), presented the opportunity for students to become main contributors to enhanced teaching and learning approaches. Furthermore, with action research, the stakeholders (such as students) are involved in a cycle of inquiry within a particular system—in this case, the micro system of academic writing in the English teacher education or the macro system of higher education (Bradbury et al., 2019). In this study, students engaged with feedback on their writing in two cycles (one per semester), with each cycle consisting of two feedback opportunities. They were expected to reflect on the feedback they had received and make decisions about future learning processes.

The synergy between social constructivism and PAR lies in their shared emphasis on knowledge as co-constructed through dialogue, reflection, and collaboration. In this study, feedback was not delivered as a one-way transmission but as a dialogic and iterative process, embodying Vygotsky's (1978) notion that learning emerges through social interaction. These feedback cycles created opportunities for collective knowledge production where students and the lecturer jointly interpreted feedback, negotiated meaning, and reimagined writing practices. PAR, as an emancipatory methodology, supports this collaborative

approach by positioning students not as passive recipients of instruction but as co-researchers capable of shaping their learning experiences. Through active engagement in feedback decisions and reflections, students exercised agency, contributing to the generation of actionable insights—an embodiment of the emancipatory potential of PAR within a social constructivist paradigm.

Participants

The participants consisted of distance third- and fourth-year English for Education students enrolled at a regional university in South Africa. Although the university has three physical campuses across the North West and Free State provinces, the distance students are scattered across South Africa and some are even based in Namibia. The ages of these students also range from 19 to 60 years. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. There were five third-year students and five fourth-year students who agreed to participate in the research. All participants joined the study voluntarily, and were informed that they could withdraw from it at any time. An independent person (a senior student studying in the contact mode of delivery) was used to recruit students to ensure that they would not feel pressured to join the study. The independent recruiter posted an announcement on the students' learning management system and invited prospective participants to join an online information session. During the online information session, the recruiter briefly explained the research. The participants were informed exactly how data would be collected and analysed, and the purpose of the study. They were also informed that they would not receive any penalties for not participating. Students who were interested in participating then completed an informed consent form, which they emailed to the independent recruiter. The form elucidated the details of the study and assured the participants of their voluntary consent. No participant's identity or personal information was shared during the research process. Only students' email addresses were used throughout the study (by the researcher) and students' identities were kept confidential when the interview was transcribed. Students were also asked permission for a voice recording to be made during the interview. In addition, students had the option to open or close their cameras during the online interview.

The researcher at all times acted in the best interest of the participants and kept their safety and privacy in mind. To mitigate any power relations, they did not know that their lecturer would be the primary researcher until after they had voluntarily agreed to participate. Students were also aware that they had a right to decline participation in the research at any time. Students were aware that participating in the research would have no direct influence on their marks for the module (indirectly, students benefited from receiving more than one round of feedback). Taking these ethical issues into account ensured a reliable study that yielded sound results.

Ethics Statement

The researchers obtained ethics clearance and gatekeeper's permission from the relevant committees at the North-West University prior to conducting the research. All participants signed informed consent forms before data collection. Research data can be obtained by contacting the first author.

Data Collection and Analysis

One of the main aims of the research was to explore participants' engagement with the SDL feedback framework. The data collection methods used in this study consisted of learning analytics consisting of participants' engagement on a website, open-ended questionnaires with the use of Google Forms, document analysis in the form of student essays, and a focus-group, semi-structured interview. The website served as a vehicle for students' engagement with the SDL feedback framework, where each step of the SDL process was embedded on the website, with feedback added as a step (see Table 1).

Table 1

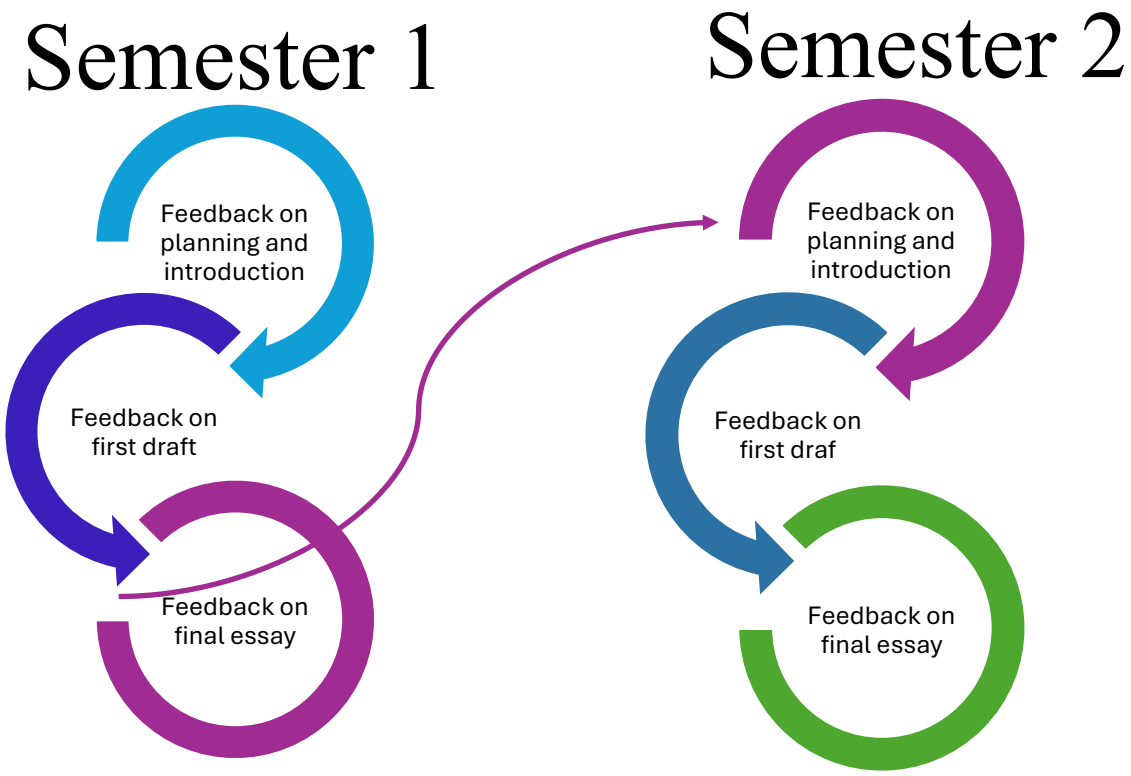
SDL Process With Feedback (Authors' own compilation based on Knowles's [1975] SDL process)

Step in the Process	Action of Participants
1.	Identifying learning needs and formulating learning goals
2.	Identifying resources and strategies for learning
3.	Engaging with feedback on the planning, first draft and final essay
4.	Self-assessment—have learning goals been met?
5.	Self-reflection—were decisions during the learning process effective to ensure enhanced learning?

Within this process (more specifically, during Step 3), there were feedback cycles where participants could make decisions about how they wanted to receive feedback. Participants were also expected to reflect on the feedback and the impact it had on their learning. The feedback cycles are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Feedback Cycle in This Study (Authors' own compilation)



The participants engaged in the entire SDL process and feedback cycle once per semester (twice a year), with a different essay topic each semester. In addition, two open-ended questionnaires were completed every semester. At the end of the year, one semi-structured, focus-group interview was conducted with all participants to determine their overall experience with the learning process. Learning analytics were applied where the researcher analysed the participants' engagement on the website throughout the learning process. The participants' first drafts and final essays for both semesters were analysed and performance, feedback, and areas of improvement were indicated on an Excel sheet. Finally, the questionnaires and transcribed interview were coded in ATLAS.ti™ Version 23 by the researchers. Although many findings emerged from the data analysis, this article reports specifically on the students' engagement with feedback during the learning process.

Member checking formed an important part of the data collection and analysis process. To ensure collaborative production of knowledge and participant validation of the researchers' interpretation of participant engagement, member checking took place during the focus-group interview at the end of the data collection process. At the time of the interview, the researcher had already analysed the questionnaires, essays, and engagement with the SDL feedback framework. Consequently, the researcher included prompts to gauge whether the interpretation of students' engagement throughout the learning

process was accurate. In terms of data storage, only the primary researcher has access to the data. The recording and transcript of the interview are stored on the primary researcher's password-protected laptop. The questionnaires have been deleted from Google Forms and stored on the primary researcher's laptop. The essays are stored on the university's learning management system and the researcher's laptop. The website is no longer accessible, but all the data from the website are stored on the primary researcher's laptop. All documents stored on the primary researcher's password-protected laptop will be deleted after three years.

Results

The data were analysed and themes were compared across data sources. The major themes in terms of how students engaged with the feedback processes were positive reactions to having a choice about feedback, detailed and individualised feedback led to better identification of learning needs, more active involvement in the feedback process, enhanced interaction with the lecturer, and increased motivation to improve their writing. These are discussed in turn below.

Feedback Choice

Participants could choose more than one option from the dropdown list on how they would like to receive feedback on their first drafts. In addition, participants could also add their own methods of feedback if they wished to, acknowledging the participants as active agents of change. Table 2 shows the participants' selections in terms of feedback.

Table 2
Feedback Selection

Participant	Feedback: First Semester	Feedback: Second Semester
P1	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Engage in a discussion with your lecturer	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Engage in a discussion with your lecturer
P2	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Engage in a discussion with your lecturer - Critically engage with the rubric (self-feedback)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Engage in a discussion with your lecturer

P3	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Peer feedback in writing (anonymous)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Critically engage with the rubric (self-feedback)
P4	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Analyse three sample essays on a different topic (self-feedback)
P5	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Critically engage with the rubric (self-feedback) - Lecturer feedback in audio	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer) - Critically engage with the rubric (self-feedback)
P6	- Lecturer feedback in writing	- Lecturer feedback in writing
P7	- Lecturer feedback in writing - Lecturer feedback in audio	- Lecturer feedback in writing - Lecturer feedback in audio - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)
P8	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - Engage in a discussion with your lecturer
P9	- Lecturer feedback in writing - Lecturer feedback in audio - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - Lecturer feedback in audio - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)
P10	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)	- Lecturer feedback in writing - An assessed rubric of your draft (by lecturer)

All participants selected lecturer feedback in writing as a feedback method for both semesters. A reason for this could be that this was the method they were most familiar with. One could also deduce that the

participants found this feedback method valuable because they all selected it again for the second semester. It was good to see that the participants selected a variety of feedback methods and capitalised on the opportunity to receive extensive and varied feedback. The participants responded positively to having a choice regarding how they received feedback. One participant said:

> Something just clicked when I could choose my own version of the feedback. That showed me exactly how do I receive information best.

Another participant agreed and added:

> The in-person type of thing, that's very important for me, because I need to be able to read your tone and your body language and see what you exclaim in certain parts of my work and that's really crucial.

It became clear that participants felt encouraged and empowered by being able to choose how they wanted to receive feedback based on how they learned best. This aligns with Shearer et al. (2020) and Rapanta et al. (2020), who stated that distance students find autonomy and decision-making important for effective learning.

Comprehensive and individualised feedback enhanced awareness of learning gaps

The questionnaires provided more insight into participants' perceptions of and engagement with the feedback. All participants said the feedback information they received was valuable in showing them how to improve their writing. Participants were also asked what was good about the feedback they received on their first drafts. The participants' responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Characteristics of Quality Feedback

What was Good About the Feedback You Received?	Frequency of Code
The feedback was clear, detailed, and comprehensive, leading to accurate identification of learning gaps.	34
The feedback included positive comments and praise for what was done well.	5
The feedback catered for individual learning styles.	5
Suggestions for improvement were provided.	4
Mistakes and misunderstandings were made clear.	4

Table 3 shows that the best aspect of the feedback was that it was detailed, specific, and comprehensive, leading to accurate identification of learning gaps. For example, one participant said:

> The feedback was very detailed. When errors were made, the feedback commented back on that specific word or sentence, not just on a paragraph or the essay as a whole.

The importance of detailed and comprehensive feedback is emphasised in the literature (Dawson et al., 2018), and this study confirms its importance for distance students. During the interview, participants mentioned that the specificity of the feedback led to enhanced understanding thereof. They mentioned that they found feedback generally unclear and difficult to interpret. However, specific and comprehensive feedback that catered for each individual allowed them to interpret and understand the feedback, while assisting them to identify learning gaps they were not aware of.

Although specific and comprehensive feedback is challenging when working with large groups of students (Ryan et al., 2019), feedback is considered effective from students' perspectives when high-quality, usable, and detailed comments are provided on their work (Dawson et al., 2018). For example, participants said:

> I finally understood for the first time what I did wrong in my essay, instead of just a lot of comments where I had no idea what they meant or what I actually had to change.

> One of my arguments contradicted one of my other arguments and you explained to me why, or why it's not correct, and that helped a lot. In previous years, it would have been something like "this is wrong" or "this isn't valid."

Another participant said:

> Often . . . I'll get feedback . . . where they'll just say 'no' or 'why' . . . and you're not actually sure what they want from you or what the problem is.

They further added that being able to have a meeting with the lecturer to clarify the feedback was very helpful. Other participants said:

> I struggle to know what I need to improve when I only look at a marked rubric with no critical feedback or statements of where I went wrong and why. I realised I need detailed comments to look at when improving my work.

> Feedback to me was always "you get 10 out of 20" and then there's just a short comment to say "you can improve" or "you can work harder" or "better luck next time" or whatever, but with your feedback, it was constructive feedback and that made it possible for me to use it as scaffolding towards my final essay.

This shows that receiving detailed and comprehensive feedback assisted participants to identify their learning gaps, and make sense of and implement the feedback as part of the writing process. This aligns with the findings of the website analysis, which showed that there were many learning gaps that students did not initially identify, but where feedback served as an important tool to identify their learning needs. This reveals feedback's role in the SDL process because identifying one's learning gaps is the first step in the SDL process.

Active Agents in the Feedback Process

Liu and Yu (2022) stated that there should be an expectation for students to engage with feedback as active agents in their own learning, which is exactly what was expected in the current study. Engaging in the SDL and feedback process enhanced participants' roles as active agents in using the feedback. Participants responded that their engagement with feedback was much more effective because they had an opportunity to respond to the feedback shortly after having received it, denoting their motivation to engage with and use the feedback. One participant said:

> Then you have to wait an entire semester to try and, you know, fix what you did wrong in the first one . . . even just a feedback on the first draft made me approach feedback a lot different.

Another participant mentioned that they appreciated that they did not just receive a mark and a rubric and then that was the final mark, but that they had opportunities to respond to the feedback and improve their essays before marks came into the question:

> This really helped in the writing process.

Participants also mentioned that they engaged more actively with the rubric because it accompanied the draft:

> I always read through the rubric, but because I got feedback on the rubric now with the draft, I could engage with the rubric more intensively.

These comments clearly show that participants understood feedback as a process in which they were actively involved. They did not perceive themselves as mere receivers of marks and feedback (as is the case when receiving feedback on the final submission), but as agents of engaging with and implementing the feedback towards skills development. This was also noticeable in how students mentioned that the skills they were acquiring throughout the process could be transferred to other subjects:

> I was able to constructively apply it to my approach to my other modules and rethink my usual way of approaching assignments.

Thus, the responses show participants' understanding of feedback as a process involving them as active users, allowing them to see their contribution towards social change in the educational environment.

Participants specifically mentioned that one of the main causes of this shift in perception was that they received constructive feedback on a first attempt before being expected to submit a final essay. This aligns with Patthey-Chavez et al.'s (2004) statement that students do not engage with written comments on a final writing product. This was also emphasised by Hernández (2012) who found that feedback does not have a significant impact on learning when accompanied by a grade. Thus, allowing students to engage with feedback throughout the learning process is an important step towards self-directedness.

Interaction With Lecturer

Rapanta et al. (2020) stated that feedback serves as a form of interaction between the lecturer and students. The current study confirmed this to be the case, especially in a distance learning environment. During this study's interview, participants were asked to explain what they gained from the learning process. Participants mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to interact with the lecturer because feedback served as a medium for interaction between distance students and the lecturer. This finding aligns with the social constructivist philosophical orientation and PAR methodology employed in this research, where interaction plays a pivotal role in shaping one's experiences and perceptions. One participant said:

> What I also found valuable for me was that we actually had the opportunity for interacting . . . even if it was written interaction or we could just do a voice message quickly . . . because it actually shows you that you are there to support us and to help us and to better our understanding.

Another participant stated:

> The fact that I do have access to a more knowledgeable person—that is the most valuable part and that I will really miss next year.

Another participant also said that as a distance student, "you cannot put a value on it," referring to the interaction with the lecturer throughout the writing and learning process. Thus, participants appreciated the opportunity they had to interact with their lecturer through the feedback methods they had chosen, aligning with Rapanta et al.'s (2020) statement about feedback as interaction. This interaction motivated them to analyse and interpret the feedback and to improve their writing skills.

Increased Motivation

Lee et al. (2017) maintained that motivation to be accountable for one's learning and confidence in one's abilities are foundational in contributing to SDL. Students must take responsibility for their learning and demonstrate a level of autonomy to initiate and continue the learning process. Although guidance and facilitation could be provided from external role-players such as the teacher or peers, only the student can decide to initiate and "move into the experience"—learning can thus not be forced (Collier, 2022, p. 112).

The findings of this study revealed that the feedback led to increased motivation pertaining to essay writing, consequently leading to more self-directed students. For example, one participant said: "I am now officially spoiled and would love to continue receiving this feedback in my final year," showing motivation to be actively engaged in the learning process. Other participants also called the process of engaging with the feedback "enjoyable." Thus, it seems that students' engagement with feedback during this process led to increased motivation to learn and to further engage with feedback on writing. Additionally, participants mentioned that the feedback led to increased motivation because they understood it as a helpful process of scaffolding the development of their writing skills. One participant specifically mentioned that they were hypersensitive to criticism and had to undergo personal growth to alter their perception about the feedback:

> And the moment I did that and started viewing the criticism not as something to break me but rather to build me, oh, that was awesome!

Another participant said:

> I don't think you understand how helpful and how crucial it actually was in achieving, you know, not just a good mark, but actually feeling comfortable writing an essay.

The data served as proof of how participants' focus shifted from being driven by marks to considering the bigger process of skills development.

This was closely aligned with participants' increased motivation to write and learn. Another participant mentioned that when they realised what their learning gaps were, they knew they would have to rewrite parts of the essay completely, also adding:

> But that's okay, because I'm feeling good about it because now I'm going somewhere.

This proves how participants' understanding of the feedback they had received led to increased motivation to write and learn. The feedback seemed to ease their anxiety around essay writing and made them more confident, comfortable, and motivated for future writing tasks. Participants also included comments such as:

> I was much more relaxed about it . . . I was actually excited to follow the process again and to get your feedback.

> For the first time . . . I did not have anxiety around writing my essay.

Thus, the feedback and students' understanding of the feedback led to enhanced motivation to write and learn, possibly leading to more self-directed learners. This concurs with Kreonidou and Kazamia's (2019) statement that when students are engaged in a thinking process about their feedback, they adopt positive attitudes towards using the feedback for future learning.

Conclusion

This study found that detailed, individualised feedback significantly enhanced distance students' ability to identify learning gaps, engage reflectively, and take ownership of their academic writing. Participants valued the dialogic nature of feedback, which fostered motivation, confidence, and a clearer sense of progress. By choosing how they received feedback, students exercised autonomy—central to SDL—and developed insights into their own learning preferences, aligning with the principles of feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Liu & Yu, 2022). Our findings confirm that when feedback is actionable, sustained, and personalised, it becomes a catalyst for learner autonomy and reflective practice. The revised SDL framework presented in this study positions feedback as a cyclical and embedded component across all stages of learning, extending Knowles's (1975) original model. This reconceptualisation affirms feedback's role not merely as information but as a continuing resource that supports diagnosis, planning, reflection, and growth.

Furthermore, this study contributes a revised understanding of SDL by positioning feedback not as a peripheral support but as an embedded and cyclical element throughout the learning process. Drawing on feedback theory and student experiences, the revised SDL framework illustrates how feedback mediates between diagnosis, planning, reflection, and transformation. The study thus affirms Carless and Boud's (2018) argument that feedback literacy is foundational to learner autonomy, especially in distance education contexts. By embedding feedback at all stages of the SDL cycle, this research extends Knowles's (1975) linear model into a recursive, dynamic system that empowers learners to reflect, adapt, and re-engage in SDL with increasing confidence and competence. Furthermore, this research promotes social change in distance education by demonstrating how participatory feedback processes empower students as co-constructors of knowledge. Their active engagement with the SDL feedback cycle contributed to a more meaningful, inclusive, and responsive learning environment. As Gibbs et al. (2016) suggested, such participatory action fosters deeper learning through reflection, agency, and shared responsibility.

Suggestions for Future Research

To ensure an even more prominent focus on student contributions to the learning experience, future research focusing on the SDL feedback framework could allow students to formulate problems and suggest research questions that they think are worth exploring in their particular modules. In addition, communities of practice involving students across institutions could also increase collaborative knowledge creation.

Disclosure of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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