

Feedback Conversations to Motivate Adolescent Girls' Learning: Using Conversations to Progress Learning, Resilience and Confidence.

Karen Lewis

All Hallows' School, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

There is often a disconnect between the feedback teachers give and their students' willingness or ability to apply that feedback to their own writing. Teachers understand, though, that the way they give feedback can impact student confidence and resilience. For girls as social learners who value relationships, some form of dialogue can help to facilitate uptake of feedback and potentially support confidence and resilience. There is not an extensive body of research, however, that explores the experiences of feedback specifically for adolescent girls. In response to this, action research on student engagement with feedback was undertaken in a large all-girls' school in Brisbane, Australia. A group of thirty-six Year 11 English Literature students engaged in *feedback conversations* to encourage clarification of feedback and self-evaluation of their work. Feedback conversation transcripts, student surveys, focus group discussions, and student grades were used to find the impact of such conversations on student confidence, uptake of feedback, and improvement to their writing. Those students who engaged with feedback conversations reported feeling positive about their own learning, having improved confidence towards their potential exam performance, being more receptive to feedback, and had an increase in overall grades under exam conditions. Further research on the impact of prolonged use of feedback conversations is warranted, especially related to student confidence, resilience, and writing performance.

Feedback Conversations to Motivate Adolescent Girls' Learning: Using Conversations to Progress Learning, Resilience and Confidence.

Feedback is an integral part of supporting students to improve their writing skills. English teachers constantly give feedback on student writing, yet so often find themselves frustrated by their students' unwillingness or inability to apply this feedback to improve this skill (Robinson, 2017). Indeed, "the only thing that matters is what the student does with the feedback" (William, 2016, p.15).

To explore ways to encourage engagement with feedback, two areas must be examined: how feedback is given and the factors that enable student uptake of feedback. Evidence suggests that feedback is often given too late in the learning process for meaningful application (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017; Irons, 2008) and that students do not always find certain types of feedback, such as one-way feedback, useful (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017). There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that students often lack the confidence and resilience to apply feedback in a useful way (Dweck, 2006; Shields, 2015).

This research study is part of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools' inaugural Global Action Research Collaborative investigation of the theme: "Feedback to move forward, thrive and grow." It presents the findings of action research that explores how feedback conversations might encourage feedback uptake to improve student learning, confidence, and resilience in an all-girls' school in Brisbane, Australia.

Literature Review

Best-practice feedback must be considered when exploring the literature on how feedback can build confidence and resilience. Researchers describe the timeliness of teacher intervention as imperative. For feedback to be useful to students' learning, they need to receive it in a timely manner, early in the learning process (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Irons, 2008), and it should be designed to provide students "with information about the gap between their current and the desired performance" (Wingate, 2010, p. 520).

The most effective types of feedback have also been given attention by researchers. Firstly, feedback should be relevant and meaningful. Only the most important areas for improvement should be identified and feedback should be clear and precise (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017; Grover Tuttle, 2013; Irons, 2008). Indeed, research suggests that students “show frustration with ... too generic, ‘blanket’ feedback” (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017, p. 88).

The relevance and specificity of feedback should also be considered in how it can support learning and skill development. Noble (2007) describes the positive impact of praising skills that are developed through hard work "despite obstacles" (p. 35). In fact, mastery of skills related to specific circumstances can foster a resilient response to a difficult situation (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011; McGrath, 2007; Noble, 2007). Adolescents need support to build resilience—they cannot do it on their own—and so encouraging students to "accept... help" also goes a long way to strengthening resilience (American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 6). So, specific feedback related to skill development is one way to build resilience in students.

Secondly, feedback needs to involve dialogue or conversations to ensure understanding and student buy-in. If both the teacher and student are engaged in a conversation of sorts (verbal, written or digital), the teacher can respond more meaningfully to both the student’s work and the student’s understanding of the feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Irons, 2008; Robinson, 2017). Further, conversations can help to motivate students and make them feel heard (Irons, 2008). Sadler (1989), whose work with feedback is still considered relevant 30 years on, describes the problem with not engaging in a feedback conversation:

“Not only is the feedback conveyed in propositional form, but the number of comments and their content depends upon the willingness of the teacher (and the time available) to actually make the comments, the ability of the teacher to express the feedback in words, and the ability of the student to interpret the comments” (p. 135).

This further supports Irons’ (2008) assertion that “feedback should be able to be used as a catalyst for dialogue between teacher and students” (p. 45). If feedback conversations are recorded,

this can provide further benefit as students can revisit these afterwards to ensure understanding. Written and digital conversations can support this reflective process (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017, p. 86). All this links to Robinson's (2017) assertion that there is "a lot of power in the one-on-one conversation ... you're able to adapt the feedback you're providing accordingly" (p. 23).

Understanding that adolescent girls respond well to positive relationships and that they are social learners suggests that a conversational style of feedback would be useful to their learning process. Indeed, research suggests that meaningful relationships further help to build confidence and resilience in adolescents. Students who feel confident to develop skills, even when this involves making mistakes, tend to be those who have the "secure base of a warm/caring relationship that encourages safe exploration of the environment" (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011, p. 140). Wiliam (2016) suggests that relationships between teacher and student are paramount:

"The teacher needs to know the student—to understand what feedback the student needs right now ... [a]nd to receive feedback in a meaningful way, the student needs to trust the teacher—to believe that the teacher knows what he or she is talking about and has the student's best interests at heart" (p. 15).

Fuller (2020) explores this idea further when he notes that girls, particularly those "who have a sense that [teachers] like them and are interested in them ... will want to collaborate" (p. 1). So, adolescent girls will be receptive to feedback if they are supported by mentors who have genuine care for their well-being; that is, where relationships are "grounded in good listening and establishing safety and basic trust" (ReachOut, 2007, p. 5).

These ideas regarding the development of confidence and resilience also tie in with what we know about how girls learn. According to the National Coalition of Girls Schools (2016), "[g]irls are more likely to have a fixed mindset" and are "prone to perfectionism and have a fear of failure"; factors that tend towards a lack of resilience. For this reason, strong and supportive relationships are essential for receptivity of feedback through conversation and can further support the development of resilience and confidence.

Positive teacher-student relationships can also be an important way of countering student reluctance to engage with feedback in the first place. Feedback has been shown to have a direct correlation with self-esteem, especially in adolescents who have a fixed mindset. Shields (2015) found that “the emotions evoked from reading the feedback are so strong that they prevent the student using it to improve and develop” (p. 615). In her groundbreaking book *Mindset*, Dweck (2006) also notes that for those “with the growth mindset, success is about stretching themselves” (p. 17) after receiving feedback, yet for those with a fixed mindset “one evaluation can measure you forever... [so] they must succeed perfectly and immediately” (p. 29). So, instead of learning from feedback, adolescents—especially those with a fixed-mindset—can simply try to protect their self-esteem (Dweck 2006; Wingate, 2010) and in so doing, not engage with nor learn from the feedback.

Emotional reactions can, therefore, have an impact on confidence and motivation. Irons (2008) points out that for students to “learn effectively they need to be motivated to learn” (p. 35). This suggests that teachers should look at how they can best motivate students to be receptive to feedback. When considering the need to protect self-esteem, positive feedback can be very useful. As Irons (2008) observes, “positive feedback will enhance student confidence in their academic abilities and as such improve academic performance as students develop confidence in their academic abilities” (p. 37).

Positive feedback, however, needs to be delivered in a “helpful” way that does not develop a “false sense of achievement” or “understanding” (Irons, 2008, p. 37). This can be done through what Dweck (2006) describes as “constructive criticism” (p. 53), a notion that Irons (2008) seconds. Ideally, feedback “should be constructive and reflect the effort that [students] have put into any assessment activities but also be meaningful in the context of their future learning needs” (Irons, p. 44). Indeed, Wingate (2010) discovered that students who “had utilised their feedback comments improved” but those who did not improve had “paid little attention to their feedback comments and not acted upon them” (p. 519). Therefore, students need to be motivated and emotionally prepared to receive feedback in order to learn.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe the “ways and manner in which individuals interpret feedback information is the key to developing positive and valuable concepts of self-efficacy about learning, which in turns leads to further learning” (p. 101). The hope with providing feedback is that students will both “emotionally accept what is being said” and “understand” what is being offered by the teacher and so that they are willing and able to apply the feedback (Grover Tuttle, 2013, p. 37). The resilience and confidence regarding receptivity to feedback again link to the importance of positive relationships, potentially fostered through conversation.

The third effective feedback practice that researchers have explored is the idea that students should engage in self-reflection (Irons, 2008; Roskos & Neuman, 2012; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2016). Sadler (1989) notes that taking ownership of their learning is essential for students (p. 129). This feeds into the notion of self-evaluation, which purports that teacher feedback should eventually lead to a degree of learning that means students can meaningfully assess their own work (Boud, Lawson & Thompson, 2013; Irons, 2008; Wiliam, 2016). Ownership of learning and self-assessment of learning can then lead to a feedback conversation as it provides “a starting point or dialogue” (Irons, 2008, p. 56). It becomes a fluid and circular process. This then ties back to the importance of positive relationships.

What is interesting to note in much of the broad body of literature is that a specific focus on adolescent girls is absent. There is certainly a focus on children or adolescents for both feedback and resilience, but rarely is this narrowed to the particular needs of adolescent girls. This insight makes clear the need for a study on what will make adolescent girls resilient and receptive to feedback to be able to make use of it for their learning. Hence, these research-informed approaches to feedback were applied to adolescent girls in this action research project.

Research Context

As the oldest school in the state of Queensland, All Hallows’ School is an established pillar of all-girls’ education. The school prides itself on its resources, including being at the forefront of technological educational advances. Its some 1600 students from Grades 5–12 are generally high-

achieving and the culture of academic success tends to mean that achievement is high stakes. This has, in recent years, led to increased anxiety and a lack of confidence and resilience among girls who perceive that they are not achieving to the high standard they have set for themselves. For their teachers, however, this high standard is about learning rather than academic results. So, often there is a discrepancy between teacher expectations of high quality learning practices focused on skill development and student expectations of perceived high quality results on summative assessment tasks.

The Action

There are numerous factors that hinder student engagement with feedback: student perception of the value of different types of feedback, student confidence relating to skill development, and student resilience to constructive feedback. The teachers in the English Department at All Hallows' School have been consciously evolving feedback practices to better assist their students to improve both their confidence and the quality of their writing. In addition, the Department has been exploring aspects of academic care that support student resilience, and thus student willingness, to accept and apply feedback to their writing. With the aim of improving students' responsiveness to feedback, the following research questions were designed:

- What type of student engagement with the feedback process leads to receptive uptake of feedback?
- What type of student engagement with the feedback process improves student confidence?
- Can feedback conversations encourage students to use feedback to improve their writing?

In response to these questions and to address the key themes that emerged from the literature review, a conversational feedback model was designed to cultivate resilience and receptivity to feedback. A list of the key themes and how they were incorporated into the feedback model is provided in Table 1.

Table 1*Findings from the Literature and impact on feedback model design*

Findings from the literature – confidence and resilience are built when:	Impact on feedback model design
Students see a genuine development of their skills and this is acknowledged by teachers	Students required to annotate their own work so they can identify where they have applied the feedback and have this checked by the teacher.
Students have positive relationships with teachers who provide feedback that is constructive through support, establishing trust and listening and discouraging perfectionism	Dialogue with teacher to be on-going rather than a one-way feedback model. Teacher to provide positive reinforcement and address student-specific concerns.
Feedback is given early in the learning process, involves dialogue, and encourages student buy-in and self-evaluation	Teacher to give targeted and specific feedback, formative feedback will occur early in the term, and students will have the opportunity to seek clarification on feedback before applying it.

The conversational feedback model was trialed on a group of thirty-six Year 11 English Literature students during Semester 2, 2020. To align with student survey results that reflected favorability of written feedback, and to facilitate the logical progression of conversations over time that would be captured all in one place, a conversation table was provided to students (see Table 2). This table was completed in the students' OneNote by teacher and student as part of the conversational feedback model. Face-to-face conversations were also encouraged, but this table was designed as a way of capturing the conversation for future reference and allowing for self-evaluation through annotation.

Table 2

Feedback Conversation Table

Feedback from teacher
Student questions on feedback
Teacher response to questions from student
Student application of feedback (with annotations that show where you have applied the feedback)

Data Collection

Initial data collection pre-intervention was used to set a baseline for student resilience and receptivity to feedback. Data were collected over the course of an eight-week English Literature study in which the culminating summative assessment task was an analytical essay under exam conditions. The post-intervention data were collected during the teaching of a second eight-week English Literature study where the culminating summative assessment task was again an analytical essay under exam conditions.

Data were triangulated through the collection of:

- artifacts (student practice writing and feedback transcripts on student work)
- teacher observations (engagement/interaction with feedback and uptake of feedback), and
- students' self reported responses

Survey questions and focus group questions (the groups for which were based on the number of feedback opportunities taken up by students) were designed to measure confidence, perception of feedback quality, and the impact of the feedback conversations. Critical to this process was a clear delineation between the standard feedback delivered during the first eight-week English Literature study and the modified feedback delivered during the second eight-week period, which was based on the use of feedback conversations to improve student confidence and receptivity to feedback (see Table 3).

Table 3

Comparison of feedback given pre- and post-intervention

Pre-intervention feedback	Post-intervention feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early formative feedback on analytical paragraph writing • Later formative feedback on a practice essay before the essay exam • Feedback consists of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Check lists (structure/ style/ content) on a sliding scale (needs attention/ developing/ working well) * Global feedback comment on general areas for improvement at the end of individual student paragraph/essay * Whole-class feedback on general trends in the work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early formative feedback on analytical paragraph writing • Later formative feedback on a practice essay before the essay exam • Feedback consists of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Feedback conversation 1:</i> 1. Student provides teacher with a sample of work for feedback 2. Teacher provides written comment on two specific areas for focus 3. Student responds with question/s for clarification or affirms understanding 4. Teacher clarifies where needed

	<p>5. Student edits the original work and then annotates where and how the feedback has been implemented</p> <p><i>Feedback conversation 2:</i></p> <p>6. As above for a second sample of work</p> <p><i>Feedback conversation 3:</i></p> <p>7. Students write a practice essay and annotate it to show where they have utilised the feedback from the two previous conversations</p> <p>8. One final short conversation between teacher and student for essay clarification before the exam</p>
--	--

The collected data from student surveys, feedback conversations, and observations of student engagement with feedback contributed to a picture on student resilience and receptivity to feedback. This data also highlighted the confidence of students in relation to their work. Surveys were administered to all 36 students at the start of the unit, after formative feedback was given, immediately before students sat the graded assessment, and then prior to the return of grades. Focus group discussion data were also collected from 18 of the 36 students who comprised focus groups of 4–5 students each.

The impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic cannot be underestimated. Original plans for the scope and scale of this study needed to be greatly reduced due to the overwhelming nature of the academic and emotional impact being experienced by students. Student annotations on written work replaced two-minute screencasts on application of feedback, written feedback was used in favour of audio feedback, the number of writing samples given feedback was reduced and peer feedback was abandoned altogether.

Data Analysis

The results were collated in response to each of the three research questions.

Research Question 1: What type of student engagement with the feedback process leads to receptive uptake of feedback?

Prior to the Intervention of feedback conversations

Students were surveyed about feedback from teachers on both formative and drafting tasks. They were asked questions relating to the type of feedback they felt was most useful and their attitudes towards feedback. Findings of note during the baseline period:

- 35 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed they want specific feedback that points to certain parts of their work
- 34 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed they try to apply all the feedback they are given
- 34 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed they like getting feedback from their teachers
- 33 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed they like feedback in written form
- 28 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed that face-to-face feedback is useful, and
- 26 of the 36 students surveyed agreed/strongly agreed they ask questions if they don't understand the feedback given.

When asked general questions such as, "What feedback do you think is most/least helpful to you?" students gave a variety of comments relating to individual, specifically targeted written feedback. In addition, numerous students also made direct comments about the manner in which feedback is delivered (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4

Examples of Student Comments on Individual, Specifically Targeted Feedback

<i>"I like personalised feedback that is related to specific criteria points."</i>
<i>"The list feedback that we got was kind of hard to apply as some of the dot points were quite broad and I didn't really know what that meant for my writing."</i>
<i>"Individualised written feedback is the most helpful to me since I can gauge if I am on track with my learning."</i>
<i>"Group feedback and general feedback are not helpful because I don't know what applies to me and I worry that I'll miss things in my own work which could apply to me but I don't think applies to me."</i>

Table 5

Examples of Student Comments on Honest, Unvarnished Feedback

<i>"How I can enhance my writing like instead of saying what I did wrong and what I should've said for that particular question but maybe a broader idea of how to fix it for future questions."</i>
<i>"Brutal, unforgiving, detailed."</i>
<i>"I think being specific and saying where I could improve."</i>
<i>"Harsh, to the point, detailed feedback and not only what I did wrong but how I can correct or improve."</i>

Post-intervention

After the feedback conversations, students continued to comment on preferring the same type of feedback, but this time were able to acknowledge the impact of the conversation feedback model. For example, in relation to their uptake of feedback, some observations are noted in Table 6.

Table 6

Examples of Student Comments on their Uptake of Feedback

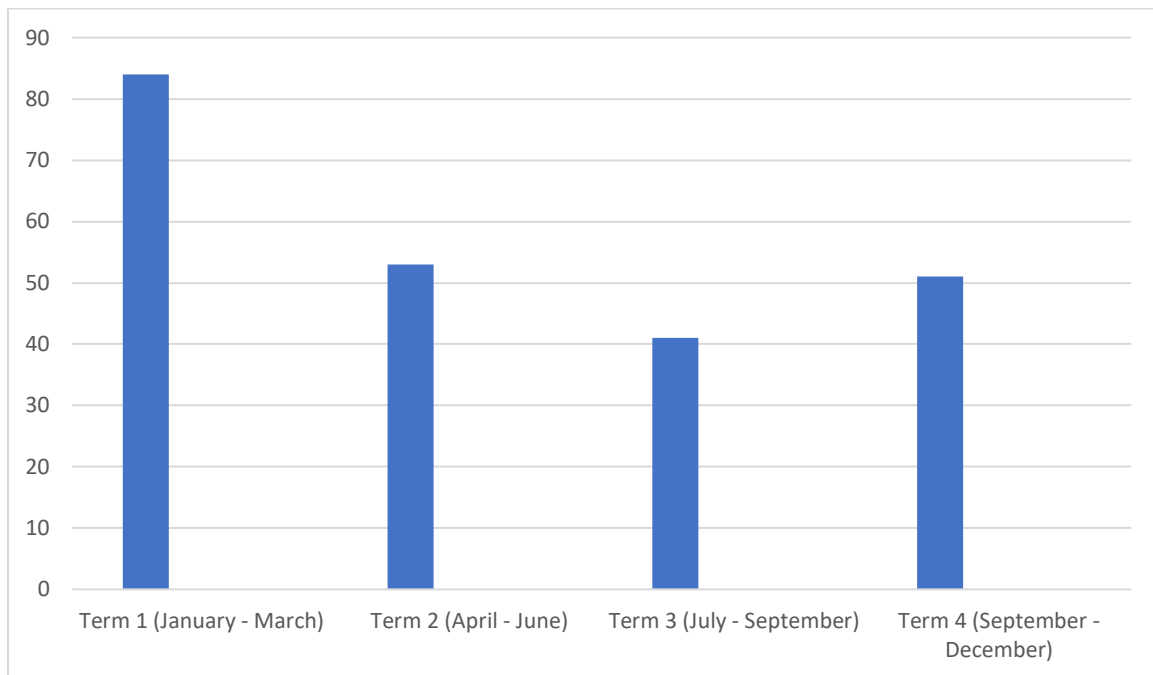
<i>"I think I responded well because in my second practice task I didn't receive the same major issue as before."</i>
<i>"I definitely tried to implement it but I didn't send my teacher the new paragraphs I wrote after the initial feedback. In hindsight I should have."</i>
<i>"I rewrote practice paragraphs responding to the feedback."</i>
<i>"I think that at first I didn't really understand the feedback and as a consequence I paid little attention to it, but when we had to do the conversation feedback I feel it really helped."</i>
<i>"I tried to take on the feedback and apply it to the next paragraph I wrote."</i>
<i>"I responded through rewriting one of the practice paragraphs, fixing it up according to the written feedback although I could have done more by getting feedback on my improved version."</i>
<i>"I think I responded well to the feedback and tried to apply it to the next practice, but I could have benefitted perhaps from redoing the previous practice task."</i>

With the offering of feedback conversations rather than one-way written feedback, there were five students who chose to fully embrace this option. However, a further seven students chose to apply the feedback to future tasks, thus engaging in some form of conversational feedback. Therefore, twelve students in total actively engaged with the feedback they were given. Twenty students sought feedback but showed no sign of self-reflection by applying it and four students chose not to seek any formative feedback at all.

To place this study in the context of the global pandemic, the number of practice tasks and drafting tasks submitted by students for formative feedback was tallied (see Figure 1) for this Year 11 Literature cohort for the entire 2020 Australian school year (rather than just the second semester when the study took place).

Figure 1

Formative/Practice Tasks Completed by Students



In Term 2, there was a significant dip in the number of tasks undertaken by students, which directly corresponded with the COVID-19 related lockdown in Queensland. The number of tasks completed, and by extension student engagement, did not recover from this point.

Those students who did choose to engage in feedback conversations did so differently, depending on their own feedback needs. Samples are displayed in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2

Feedback Conversation through Clarification

<p>Feedback from teacher</p> <p>● some great ideas here - this is a really good start. At this stage I think there are two things you can be working on in your analytical writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discerning selection of subject matter means that you would exploit at least a couple of short quotations from the novel to support your analysis of the idea that identity is not static nor stable. By selecting specific evidence like this, you can both be precise and also get into some detailed discussion of the language choices and aesthetic features. • Take another look at the specifics of your discussion - you discuss how identity is related to image but you don't really prove that identity is neither static nor stable. So, your other area of focus is to ensure you address the specifics of the question.
<p>Student questions on feedback</p> <p>I definitely agree with this. I understand that the question was not really tackled at all, would you suggest for me to each element of "static" as one argument and "stable" as a second? This might address the question more directly.</p>
<p>Teacher response to questions from student</p> <p>You could do that or simply work with not being "static nor stable" as a synonym for identity as changeable. That might be a more straightforward way to do it.</p>
<p>Student application of feedback (with annotations that show where you have applied the feedback)</p>

Figure 3

Feedback Conversation through Annotations of the Second Attempt on a Task

<p>Feedback from teacher</p> <p>● some great ideas here - this is a really good start. At this stage I think there are two things you can be working on in your analytical writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have highlighted run-on sentences - this is still an area for you to address. You can access the work here to help you with this: Sentence construction • You are selecting some interesting quotations so use as evidence but you do need to <u>analyse</u> these in greater depth rather than just list and explain them. Your task with analysis is to look at how they prove your point. You might like to revise the work we did with King Lear to help with this: Analysing - a step further
<p>Student questions on feedback</p>
<p>Teacher response to questions from student</p>
<p>Student application of feedback (with annotations that show where you have applied the feedback)</p> <p>"As Mario Praz points out, Wilde's prose style is essentially 'decorative', and this entails a kind of theatricalisation of the novel form: 'Wilde's point-of-view, in fact, is always scenic; he sees things in stage-perspective; he is all the time arranging his characters, his landscapes, his events, and making them pose.'"</p> <p>Reference: an excerpt from Sheahan, Paul, 2005, 'A Moby of Drowning', <i>High Studies Review</i>, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 333-340</p> <p>Do you agree with this point of view? What evidence can you find which supports such a claim?</p> <p>Oscar Wilde's <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> uses the characterisation of Sibyl Vane to portray all characters as actors in a play, allowing the audience to view it as a "theatricalisation of the novel form". Sibyl's identity is fluid throughout the novel, and is entirely dependent on the character she is performing as on a given night. Due to this fluidity she is often described as "all the heroines of romance" or even "a dream" (Wilde, p100). In characterising Sibyl as fluid and possibly a 'dream' conjured up by Dorian himself, Wilde presents Sibyl as someone who could not exist outside of art. This is significant as it forces the audience to see Sibyl- and anything that comes into contact with her- as a fantasy that is completely detached from reality. Sibyl and her separation from reality is symbolic of art in <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>; not only is she an artist herself but she lives within art and that makes her 'unreal'. As an aesthete Wilde promotes restrained aestheticism within his novel, recognising that morals separate life and art. He displays this in the character of Sibyl Vane, who cannot live in reality because she is art, and who dies when reality touches her, because her identity is directly linked to the characters she plays Sibyl is "no less real than they are". (Wilde, p100) This lack of reality in her identity also seeps into the events of her life, allowing the audience to see her as an actor on a stage regardless of the time and place. As a consequence of this, anyone that interacts with Sibyl is also placed 'on stage' and becomes detached from reality, contributing to the theatricalisation of the novel. Wilde's intention to detach his characters from reality and morals is mentioned in the preface when he states "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book". Through explicitly distancing his art from morals, Wilde draws the line between reality and art, and thus separates his characters from both reality and morals in the process. Furthermore, in deliberately taking the morality away from his characters Wilde also conveys to the audience that his characters are a 'fantasy' and a theatricalisation. Thus, the characterisation of Sibyl Vane and the lack of reality that she represents, Wilde supports the perspective that his novel is a "theatricalisation".</p> <p>Well done ● You have improved in the two areas of focus - keep up the hard work! One other area of focus for you is more explicit discussion of aesthetic features. Think about how you can really tease out the impact of particular choices on the audience. For example, in the paragraph above you could have looked at the impact of the words "dream" and "romance" - what images do they conjure up? What are the connotations of such words? What do they make the audience think/feel?</p>

I think this hypothesis was more specific ✓

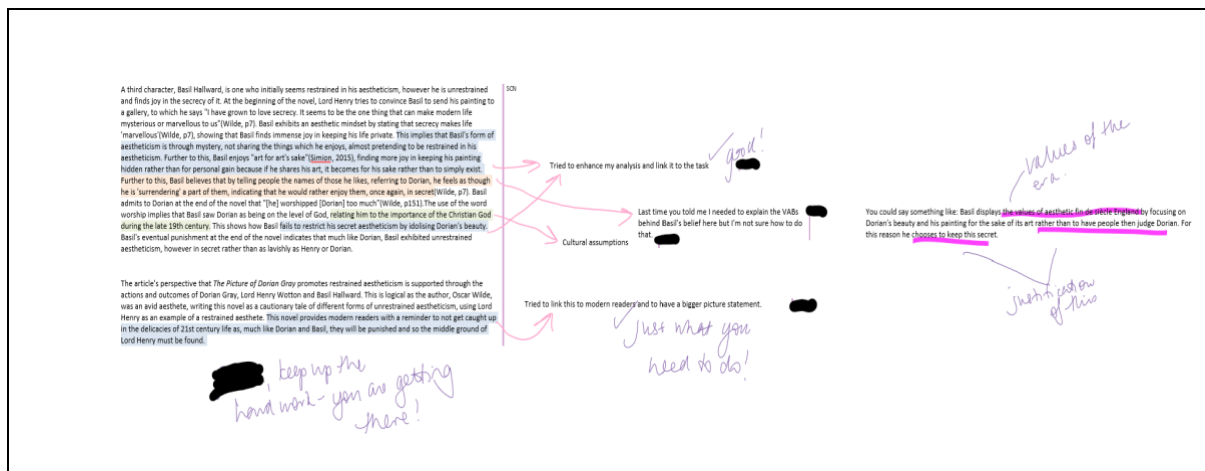
I tried to make my sentences shorter and more clear to avoid run on sentences. *clearer - well done*

This is me trying to make my analysis deeper and hit the 'how'

Selection of better evidence to back up my analysis

Figure 4

Feedback Conversation through Annotation on a Subsequent Task



Those students who chose not to participate in the conversational feedback model generally cited the inhibiting factor as being their perception of the time it would take (see Table 7).

Table 7

Student Comments Related to Perception of Time

<i>"I started a few of the practices but I didn't have time to finish them. I did want to do them."</i>
<i>"I get frustrated when you're rushing a quick paragraph – this is homework and I have to whip out a quick paragraph and you know its not your best work and your teacher points out things you already know."</i>
<i>"I thought about rewriting what I had already done but didn't."</i>

However, during these same discussions, students who had elected to participate in the conversations in some way made other observations about time or about the value in participating in the coversations (see Table 8).

Table 8

Student Comments Related to the Value of the Feedback Conversations

<p><i>“The table where you insert your paragraph, you give us feedback and then we reinsert after we’ve applied it was so helpful.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I don’t understand how but having to go through and highlight was really, really helpful because I couldn’t just go ‘yeah, I’ve analysed’. I had to go ‘here is where I have and why I’ve done it’.”</i></p>
<p><i>“The feedback was there, the paragraph was there, it wasn’t that much effort. So I found it less time consuming because I didn’t have to interpret all new information for a whole new paragraph. All I had to go was go back and change a few sentences or add a new idea or put extra evidence in rather than rewriting a whole new topic sentence.”</i></p>
<p><i>“I applied time to it because it felt useful and like it felt like it was working for me. A lot of the time teachers set homework and its 7pm at night and its like ‘write this paragraph’ and I’m like ‘why?’. I don’t have half an hour to spend time on a paragraph that isn’t going to go anywhere. But spending the time on it and being able to see how it did improve my writing, and how I made progress with it, and it didn’t take that much time – that was really good. I would do it again. Like, I would do it for all my subjects.”</i></p>

Research Question 2: What type of student engagement with the feedback process improves student confidence?

Prior to the Conversation Feedback Intervention

Before the conversation feedback intervention, students were asked questions relating to their perceptions about how the feedback influenced their confidence levels. Of note:

- 29 of the 36 students surveyed noted that feedback helped increase their confidence in their own learning, and
- 24 of the 35 students surveyed noted that feedback helped them to feel confident they were doing the “right thing”.

Examples of student comments in response to general questions such as “How did the feedback make you feel?” can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9

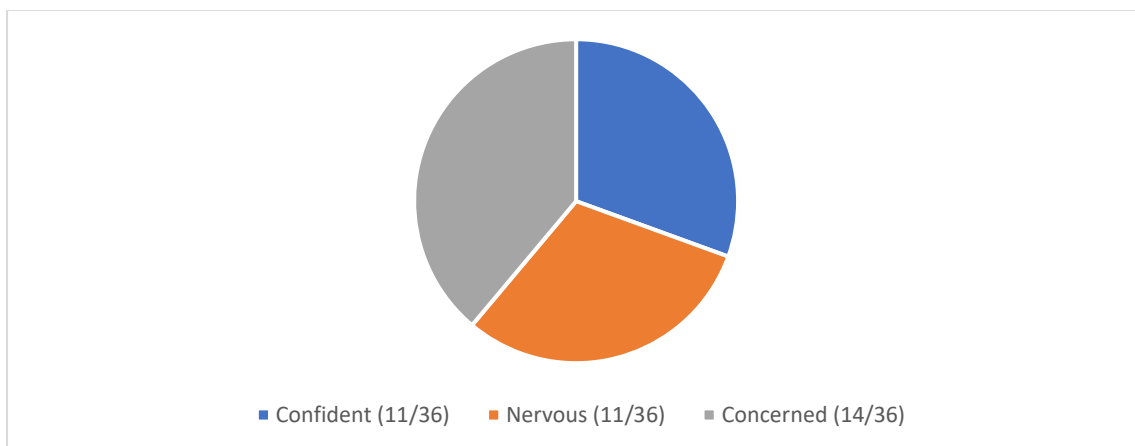
Student Comments Related to How the Pre-Intervention Feedback Made them Feel

<i>“It made me feel reassured that I know where I needed to improve and where I was going well.”</i>
<i>“The feedback made me feel confident that there are things that I am doing well with as well as things that I need to work on.”</i>
<i>“The feedback was detailed with enough positive reinforcement to not make me feel sad.”</i>
<i>“The feedback made me feel disheartened if I have tried to apply something and yet that is what I am told I did badly in. The feedback can also make me feel really excited if I only make one or two mistakes and the teacher compliments me on the rest of my work.”</i>

After receiving feedback in the “usual” way in Term 3, students were asked to describe their confidence levels before the summative exam (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Confidence Levels Prior to the Term 3 Exam



When asked what would help to improve their confidence for future exams, students gave general responses with little specific direction (see Table 10).

Table 10

Student Comments Prior to Feedback Conversations on What Would Help Improve Confidence

<i>"I wish I knew."</i>
<i>"Doing lots of practice paragraphs."</i>
<i>"LOTS OF PRACTISE :)"</i>
<i>"More individual feedback."</i>

Post-intervention

When students were asked about their confidence levels after the feedback conversation intervention, students were able to make more specific responses (see Table 11).

Table 11

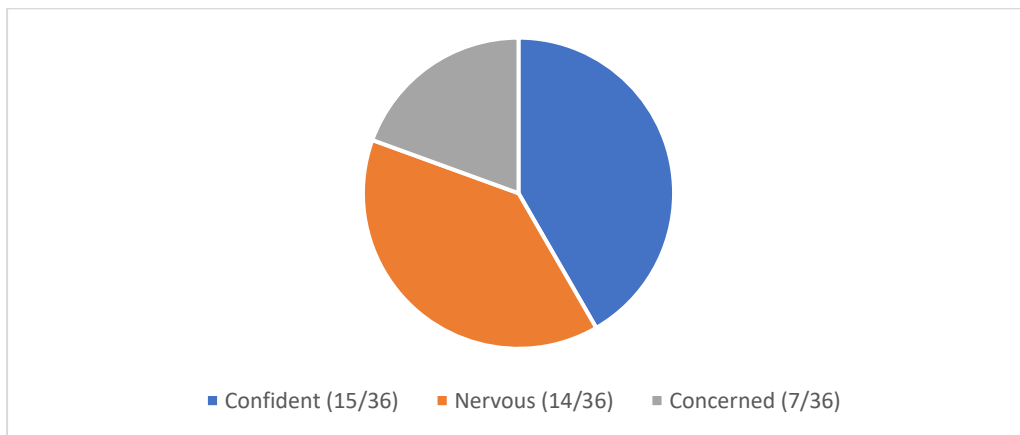
Student Comments on Confidence Following the Feedback Conversations

<i>"The feedback made me feel more confident in my abilities to improve my own writing."</i>
<i>"It has made me understand an example of what I have done wrong and how I can fix it."</i>
<i>"It helped a lot! In fact I think talking one on one is really good."</i>
<i>"I understood what I needed to improve and why as well as how to improve."</i>
<i>"I really liked the feedback on a paragraph each week as it made me feel like I was continuously improving. I also found that being able to submit a second version of a paragraph after applying the first round of feedback was very helpful."</i>

Self-reported perceived student confidence levels going into the Term 4 (post-intervention) exam also improved (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

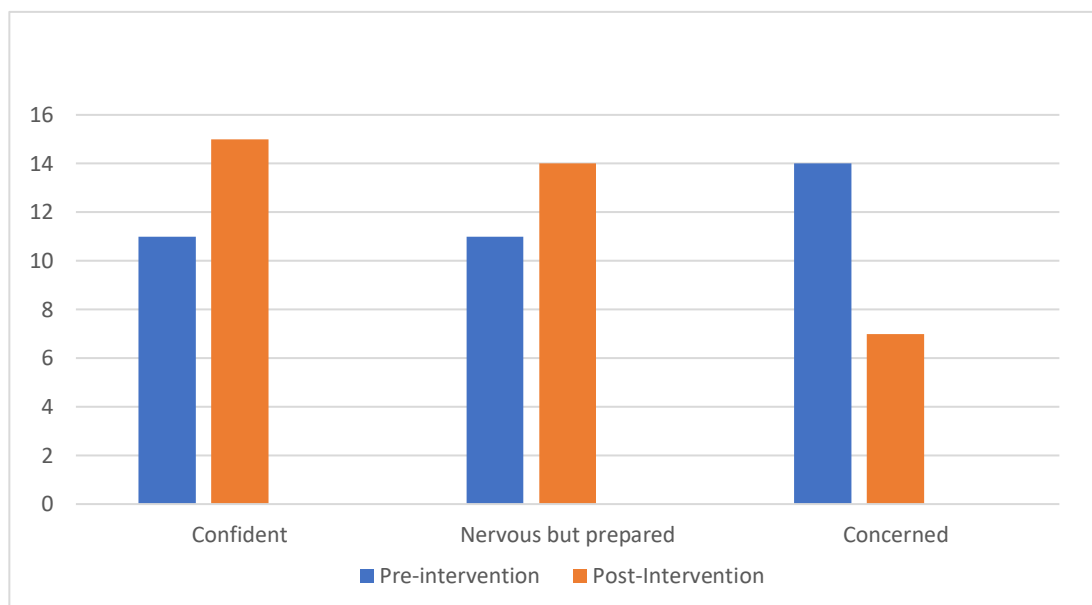
Confidence Levels Prior to the Term 4 exam



The change in confidence in relation to exam participation and possible performance from pre- to post-intervention are compared in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Comparison of Confidence Levels Pre- and Post-Intervention



During the focus group discussions post-intervention, students were able to directly articulate why their confidence had increased going into the exam (see Table 12).

Table 12

Student comments offering reasons for increased confidence

"I would rather make mistakes in my practice task and be told I made mistakes there than in the exam and be like 'oh I could have fixed it'."

"I would rather stuff it up beforehand than walk into the exam and mess it up."

"I know for me for the second practice I did I didn't get the same feedback, so I have fixed the issue."

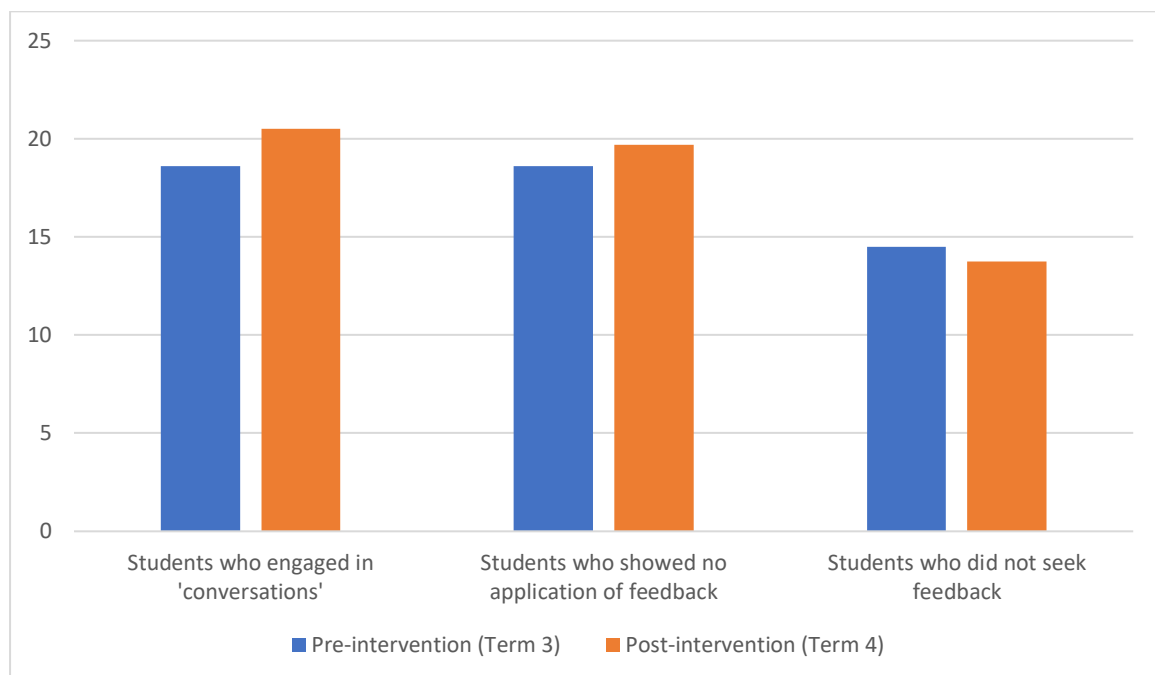
Research Question 3: Can feedback conversations encourage students to use feedback to improve their writing?

Teacher observation indicated that the quality of student work did improve for the students who engaged in feedback conversations, but over the course of one term it was not enough to significantly transfer to exam writing.

The mean grade awarded (out of 25) for students before and after the feedback conversation intervention increased most for students who engaged in feedback conversations, increased a lesser amount for students who sought feedback but did not appear to apply it, and the grades for students who did not seek feedback through a feedback conversation actually decreased slightly (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Mean Grade Awarded Pre- and Post-Intervention



Discussion of Results

Overall, students who engaged in feedback conversations increased their engagement with, and general receptivity to, feedback. These students also self-reported an increase in confidence prior to their summative exam. Following this exam, an increase in the mean grade awarded to students who engaged in feedback conversations was also recorded. The following discussion of results is organised in response to each of the research questions.

Question 1: What type of student engagement with the feedback process leads to receptive uptake of feedback?

It appears that even before the conversational feedback intervention, students were able to clearly identify and articulate what feedback they like and appreciate. Students identifying both the need for conversations (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017; Irons, 2008) and to have things written down (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017), along with the desire for specificity (Funk & van Diggelen, 2017; Grover

Tuttle, 2013, Irons, 2008) matches clearly with the findings in the literature related to this. However, despite knowing what type of feedback they appreciate, surprisingly only a third of students chose to participate in the conversation feedback model in some way, with only 5 of the 36 students completely embracing it.

Tracking the number of feedback opportunities undertaken by students over the course of the entire year suggests that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their willingness to take up new feedback opportunities. Student perception (and overestimation) of the time it would take to engage in the conversations could also have been impacted by the pandemic. This suggests a general sense of students feeling overwhelmed and overloaded by circumstances outside their control, which could have impacted their resilience in the face of potentially negative feedback—hence the reluctance of two-thirds to engage with feedback conversations.

Interestingly, those students who did choose to engage with the feedback conversations were also those who did not experience a significant decrease in the number of pieces of work submitted for feedback at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic related lockdown. This may indicate that these are already resilient students with a growth mindset who, at a time of great emotional strain, did not appear to be overwhelmed nor impacted in the same way as the majority of students. The reasons for these students maintaining their level of effort certainly warrants further investigation.

Students who successfully engaged with the conversation feedback model reported its benefits. Those who moved past the perception of conversations taking too much time ended up acknowledging that it took less time than the usual feedback model. They also reported that it was more beneficial to their understanding of the feedback and their application of it to their writing. In fact, the student comment, *“I would do it for all my subjects”*, summarises the positive impact of this conversation approach and suggests these students were either developing a growth mindset or perhaps already had one.

When looking at the student rewrites and annotations of their work—their self-reflection as part of the ongoing conversations—the uptake of the feedback is clear. By encouraging students to identify exactly where they had applied the feedback they had been given, students were encouraged to rewrite their work, identify *why* it needed to be written, and *how* to achieve improvement. Not only were these students being resilient in the face of some constructive feedback, but they were also learning from it to improve their writing, hence the skill development as described in the literature (Herreron & Boniwell, 2011; McGrath, 2007; Noble, 2007). Students, too, noticed the impact, stating that: *“being able to see how it did improve my writing and how I made progress with it ... was really good”*.

Even though the number of students involved in this part of the study is not statistically significant, there is certainly evidence to suggest that conversation feedback improved their receptivity to and uptake of feedback. Thus, their resilience, or their “flexibility” and “ability to bounce back” (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004, p. 1169) from feedback, improved using conversations as a means of clarification and self-reflection.

Research Question 2: What Type of Student Engagement With the Feedback Process Improves Student Confidence?

Students reported, even prior to the conversation feedback intervention, that feedback helped to improve their confidence, supporting the findings of the broader literature (Irons, 2008). This was borne out by the results of this action research project, which found that the self-reported confidence levels of students from pre- to post-intervention showed improvement. There was a general upward shift in the confidence of the overall group of students. The number of students feeling “confident” pre-exam rose from 11 to 15 while those feeling “nervous but prepared” rose from 11 to 14.

What is also significant about this is the decrease in the number of students who reported feeling “concerned” before the exam from 14 to 7. Students who remained in the “concerned”

group tended to mainly be those who had not sought any feedback or who had shown no apparent application of the feedback. Interestingly, all of these were also the students who fell into the group that decreased their participation in seeking feedback at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, suggesting a possible correlation.

Student desire to learn through the feedback process and thus avoid exam errors appear to be a significant motivating factor in engagement with feedback conversations: *“I would rather stuff it up beforehand than walk into the exam and mess it up”*. This in turn appears to contribute to their confidence. Indeed, as one student noted *“for the second practice I did I didn’t get the same feedback so I have fixed the issue”*. This same student reported that she was *“looking forward to feedback to see how I am progressing”*, which suggests that resilience in the face of feedback and confidence can be linked. She also reported feeling confident and *“better about this exam than last term”*. This suggests that the use of feedback conversations facilitated both a growth-mindset (Dweck, 2006) and a willingness to utilise the trusted relationship with her teacher (Fuller, 2020), and so helped build her confidence.

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that confidence improved for those students who engaged in the feedback conversations. While confidence also improved for some students who sought feedback but did not engage in conversation—possibly because this was the second essay task in a row and so natural skill development had occurred—it does suggest that feedback conversations had an impact on confidence in their writing and exam preparation.

Research Question 3: Can Feedback Conversations Encourage Students to Use Feedback to Improve Their Writing?

The mean grade awarded for students increased for two groups from pre- to post-intervention. These groups—those who sought feedback and then engaged in feedback conversations and those who sought feedback but then showed no sign of applying it—both ended Term 3 (pre-intervention) with the same mean grade awarded. Both groups saw their mean result

improve in Term 4, but the conversation feedback group had a greater increase in their mean result. The general improvement in results here could be indicative of a natural improvement in essay writing skills over the course of the two units of work. It is logical to assume that it could also be indicative of an increase in student motivation in the second unit of work as this is the first of the Internal Assessment items that contributes to the senior ATAR Score (a ranking score awarded to students at the end of their Australian schooling which is used when applying to enter university). However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student uptake of feedback opportunities does suggest that perhaps motivation was not as high as would normally have been expected.

These variables aside, the greater increase in mean grade awarded for students who chose to engage in the feedback conversations suggests the intervention had a positive impact on student writing. While teacher observation on the formative tasks in preparation for the exam suggests that there was an improvement in the quality of their essay writing skills, eight weeks of the conversation feedback model may not have been enough to see significant improvement in the final work under exam conditions. However, the group of students who did not seek any feedback saw their mean grade decrease slightly post-intervention, suggesting that any form of feedback—whether explicitly clarified, applied, and reflected upon or not—is better than nothing at all.

Conclusions

This action research suggests that feedback conversations were impactful for many students. This is especially significant given that the study was undertaken during 2020 when lockdowns occurred and pandemic uncertainty and anxiety was at its height. The evidence related to the participants who chose to embrace the feedback conversations, and the confidence and resilience that appeared to link to this, shows promising results and should be further explored in a larger study. What motivates students to engage in a changed feedback approach is also worthy of exploration as this study was unable to ascertain whether such a feedback intervention encouraged growth mindset, resilience, and confidence, or whether the students who engaged with it were the students who already had these qualities and sought to further develop them.

One student, in a letter to her teacher Year 12 Literature teacher at the start of the 2021 school year said, “please keep giving me feedback the way you did at the end of last year”. This student was one who reported feeling “scared but positive” about her final exam post-intervention. Despite her grade out of 25 decreasing by three points post-intervention, she noted the benefits of the conversation feedback model to her confidence levels and her resilience in the face of the feedback. Perhaps then, engaging in feedback conversations with our students helps them to see that their academic results are not everything. Such a simple request from this student indicates that through the conversation feedback model students were beginning to develop the skills to thrive and grow.

References

- American Psychology Association. (2007). 10 Ways to Build Resilience. In J. Healey, *Resilience and Coping Skills* (p. 6). The Spinney Press.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 80 (2), 139 - 148.
- Boud, D., Lawson, R., & Thompson, D. (2013). Does student engagement in self-assessment calibrate their judgement over time? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38 (8).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.769198>
- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset - the new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Fuller, A. (2007). From Surviving to Thriving - creating resilient learners. In J. Healey, *Resilience and Coping Skills* (pp. 36 - 40). The Spinney Press.
- Fuller, A. (2020, April 12). *Teaching Girls*. <https://andrewfuller.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Teaching-Girls.pdf>
- Funk, M., & van Diggelen, M. (2017). Feedback Conversations: Creating Feedback Dialogues with a New Textual Tool for Industrial Design Student Feedback. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies* 12 (4).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4018/IJWLTT.2017100107>
- Grover Tuttle, H. (2013). *Successful Student Writing through Formative Assessment*. Routledge.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Hefferon, K., & Boniwell, I. (2011). *Positive Psychology - Theory, Research and Applications*. Open University Press.
- Irons, A. (2008). *Enhancing Learning through Formative Assessment and Feedback*. Routledge.

McGrath, H. (2007). How to think optimistically. In J. Healey, *Resilience and Coping Skills* (pp. 9 - 12).
The Spinney Press.

National Coalition of Girls Schools. (2016). *How Do Girls Learn Best?*.

<https://ncgsblog.org/2016/09/12/how-girls-learn-best/>

Noble, T. (2007). Teaching resilience - helping kids bounce back. In J. Healey, *Resilience and Coping Skills* (pp. 34 - 35). The Spinney Press.

ReachOut. (2007). What helps to make a resilient person? In J. Healey, *Resilience and Coping Skills* (p. 5). The Spinney Press.

Robinson, T. (2017). Feedback Conversations with Senior Students. *Teacher Learning Network Newsletter 24* (1), 22-24.

Roskos, K., & Neuman, S. (2012). Formative Assessment: Simply, no additives. *The Reading Teacher*, 65 (8), <http://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01079>

Sadler, D. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18 (2), 119-144.

Shields, S. (2015). 'My work is bleeding': exploring students' emotional responses to first-year assignment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(6).

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1052786>

Tugade, M., Fredrickson, B., & Barrett, L. (2004). Psychological resilience and positive emotional granularity: examining the benefits of positive emotions on coping and health. *Journal of Personality*, 72 (6), 1161-1190.

William, D. (2016). The Secret of Effective Feedback. *Educational Leadership*, 73 (7), 10 - 15.

Wingate, U. (2010). The impact of formative feedback on the development of academic writing. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35 (5), 519–533.