



## A cup of tea and a chat

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### ABSTRACT

Offering dialogic feedback can help first year students make connections, both in terms of belonging and in relation to their academic writing skills. In this piece I discuss how offering short formative feedback sessions through dialogue on a BA Social Work degree Apprenticeship Course appeared to support students' sense of belonging and helped to reduce anxiety in 'letting go' of their first academic piece of writing.

**Keywords:** first year students, academic writing, dialogical feedback

### Introduction

I am a lecturer in Social Work, and before that I was a social worker. So much of what I have come to know is that outside of all the meetings and assessments, frameworks or theory, what can solve a problem when working with people (whether in social work or students in education), is a chat (and optional cup of tea).

That is not to undermine the complex lives of the people I have supported or indeed, attempted to teach, but when you peel away at what creates good outcomes for people or positive experiences, it has become apparent to me that there is so much to be said for the connections we make, and the dialogue we have; some of which is evident in research on student belonging (Gilani & Thomas, 2025).

When I began teaching the Preparing for Professional Social Work module for first year BA Apprenticeship students, it seemed that the formative written feedback I was providing was not doing what I had anticipated it would do (helping students to learn). I knew this to be the case because mid-module feedback from students suggested they would have liked further formative feedback opportunities. Students also asked me directly for additional assignment drop-ins and extra support specifically on 'critically reflective writing'. I would like to think that this was not solely due to my performance - though I admit, this will have had a part to play with me being new to the role.

I've surmised that my feedback not having the desired outcome may have also been related to the fact that the students I taught were in their first year of university, writing their very first academic piece of work, and feeling a little more anxious or overwhelmed than students at later stages in their academic journey. And, due to almost 100% of them being mature students, perhaps experiencing imposter syndrome, therefore needing some additional support with writing academically for the first time (Folwell & Brennan 2025).

Within discussions with students, it was a recurring theme that they struggled to 'let go' of that first piece of work, or worried that it 'wasn't good enough'. When thinking about the context of this – that many of these students have never felt 'academic' and are returning to education after many years, sometimes decades, it absolutely makes sense.

### Why I chose a dialogic mode

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When I discuss my own academic experience with students, I tell stories of how academic writing felt like I was working out a very secret code, in which each number I discovered represented what it was I was meant to be doing, or how I was meant to be doing it, and that I'd only ever break the code of academic writing once I'd discussed my work with a lecturer.

I often reflect that my university experiences could have been due to the disabilities that I did not yet know I had, and so likely isn't the issue for most of the students I teach – but what if it is for some? Or even just one? Surely it is worth investing in a twenty-minute dialogue at the beginning of a student's studies, to avoid the years of guess work I endured.

This was reflected in a discussion I had with a final year student who said that all the lecturers (including me!), always wrote in feedback that she needed to be more critically reflective, but none of the lecturers had explained what this meant in the written feedback (or she had not made sense of it if they had), and she had never managed to work out exactly where or how to do it in her writing.

### What the 'chat' looked like

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So, I decided to go back to what I feel I know works best – a chat, or to be more formal – a formative feedback dialogue. I know, as summarised succinctly through research and statistics by Gould and Day (2025), that students are often dissatisfied with written feedback, and that students often prefer dialogic feedback (Hill & West, 2020), but as a profession, we traditionally tend to offer this form of feedback at the end of academic courses – when students are completing their final projects or dissertations.

In offering the feedback sessions, I followed the GROW mentoring model (Whitmore, 2009) which allowed me to gauge student goals, resources and motivation. In terms of the approach to the sessions, this was very much a relationship-based dialogue, adopting skills that can be better understood through the work of Ruch et al. (2018). The process also drew on the idea of reciprocal questioning, in which meaning can be 'co-constructed' as explored in Walsh's (2022, pp. 29-32) work on "feedback that fuels learning" .

### Conclusion

Of course, we teach students how to be critically reflective, and there is ample support at the university for academic writing. However, in terms of developing intrinsic motivation to learn (Shirvani et al., 2024), both for me, and the students I have taught, dialogic feedback sessions have enabled me to strive for the holistic approach to learning and teaching described by Dickinson and Wolfenden (2024), in that it has helped us to form a sense of community and foundations for a compassionate student / teacher relationship.

Over the last three years of engaging with students in dialogic formative feedback sessions, some students have appeared to have light bulb moments, but the majority simply left the twenty minutes either appearing more motivated/ more confident in their abilities/ grateful that they'd been given the time to work through ideas and plans, or just thankful to have been provided with clarity.

So, what am I advocating for? Well, it hardly feels groundbreaking or innovative to say but...

Time - at the start of a course for one-to-one formative discussion between the student and the lecturer, structured into modules to help make those connections - both in relationships and in terms of learning.

## A cup of tea and a chat

And choice - not everyone will need the dialogue – fine, no problem. Some may choose to have written or recorded feedback instead – great, that can be arranged.

Call it a mentoring session, a dialogic formative feedback meeting. I call it a cup of tea and a chat.

## Biography

*Susan Hodkin* is a Lecturer in Social Work at Sheffield Hallam University. Susan has a keen interest in innovative and inclusive teaching, and creating student led and personalised teaching experiences. Prior to working as a lecturer, Susan had a career in adult mental health social work.

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