

Incorporating Peer Feedback Writing Workshops in Political Theory

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Abstract

This project asks how the incorporation of peer feedback methods can improve student writing in political theory while also supporting other learning goals. I detail the process of designing and implementing writing workshops as part of an elective course for students at the bachelor's and master's level. I assess the workshops through contemporaneous notes on organizing and facilitating the workshops and through student evaluations conducted after the completion of the workshops. Based on these methods of evaluation, I conclude that the workshops support complex engagement with course material by the students, foster students' abilities to comment on peer work, and improve student writing. The project closes by reflecting on how these workshops can be adapted to different exam formats and improved for future use.

1.0 Introduction

The specialization in Political Theory within the Department of Political Science seeks to cultivate students' abilities to produce clear, concise writing capable of addressing complex ideas. Core courses in the specialization utilize multiple learning techniques to improve student writing. These include writing assignments focused on the interpretation of texts, comparisons between theorists, and the process of formulating objections. In terms of writing instruction, the courses utilize portions of class meetings to review the directions and expectations of upcoming writing assignments and offer concrete advice about organizing the writing process. Student assignments receive written feedback, and class time is set aside for instructors to address recurring issues. Student evaluations have expressed appreciation for the time and detail committed to this feedback process.

Tasked with creating elective courses for Spring 2020 that would complement the curriculum of the specialization in Political Theory, I wanted to design a series of activities that would support writing instruction within these courses as well. I devised a plan to incorporate a writing workshop into one of my courses. The aims of the workshop included improving student writing, cultivating students' abilities to provide feedback on peer writing, and fostering sustained engagement with course materials. Through the workshop, students would utilize class time and online methods to exchange feedback on written work, revising and editing their writing over the course of the semester. In addition to providing a greater amount of feedback, the workshop would offer a different type of feedback, requiring students to present their work to peers and formulate comments on the material of their peers. The incorporation of peer feedback offers a pedagogical technique capable of efficiently and effectively increasing feedback on student work while improving learning outcomes. A recent pamphlet on feedback published by the Department of Political Science notes peer feedback "has always been an important part of the University of Copenhagen learning model" (Department of Political Science 2019, 8). Peer feedback workshops would align instruction methods with the aims and objectives of instruction within the Department.

While feedback is an essential part of the learning process, providing feedback is demanding. When teaching writing, extensive feedback can quickly consume more time than course preparation. It can

be hard to know if feedback will pay dividends, that is, whether or not students will look beyond the grade and into the substance of the response. Effective feedback must be provided with some frequency and detail, it should address the scope of the assignment and the student's current level of understanding, and it needs to be provided in a timely manner (Gielen, Peeters, et al. 2010, 304). Ideally, the student will also have an opportunity to utilize feedback and directly incorporate it into future work.

Effective peer feedback provides an elegant solution to the challenge of providing additional feedback (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin 2014). For the instructor, it decreases the workload involved in offering additional feedback, while having the added benefit of turning the production of feedback into part of the learning process. Members of the Faculty of Social Sciences note that students find giving and receiving feedback to be a rewarding and effective part of the learning process (University of Copenhagen n.d.). Feedback from other students not only increased the quantity of feedback available to students. It also provided the challenge of distinguishing between helpful, constructive feedback and feedback that did not engage effectively or thoughtfully with their work. Students sought "justified" feedback, comments and criticisms that provide clear evidence of a problem in the student's work and explain the rationale behind the commentary. Research on feedback has suggested that engaging with and responding to justified feedback may be even more important than the accuracy of the feedback (Gielen, Peeters, et al. 2010).

This project asks how the incorporation of peer feedback methods can improve student writing in political theory while also supporting other learning goals. In what follows, I detail the process of designing and implementing writing workshops as part of a seminar format elective course for thirty-seven students at the bachelor's and master's levels. I assess the workshops through student evaluations and a series of notes I recorded during the course of organizing and facilitating the workshops. The project concludes with reflections on how to improve the writing workshop format for future use.

2.0 Designing & Facilitating Peer Feedback Writing Workshops

The writing workshops were a part of The City in Political Theory, a newly created elective course in the Department of Political Science designed to expand the offerings available for master's students in the specialization in Political Theory but open to bachelor's students as well. The course included three assignments: an interpretive essay, a comparative essay, and a final written free assignment. Two workshops were held over the course of the semester—one following the interpretive essay and one following the comparative essay.

The workshop was modeled in part on critique-focused writing groups utilized in postgraduate programs. Such writing groups—where supervisors (or instructors) work as facilitators, peer feedback is drafted in advance, and formal institutional support encourages participation—generate rich, deep feedback between peers and have been found to create bonds of a scholarly community that extend beyond the classroom (Guerin and Aitchison 2018, 52). My intention was also to familiarize master's students with a writing group format that has been noted for its success in supporting postgraduate research (Guerin and Aitchison 2018).

At the time of planning the workshop, the course proposal had already been approved by the Study Board with a free written assignment as the exam, and as result, only the final paper would count toward the students' grades. This produced some concern that students might not participate. The course proposal was submitted before I had planned to incorporate the workshop. Had I known that I would include the workshops, a portfolio exam would have been preferable. To encourage participation in the workshop, students were encouraged to produce writing that could be revised

and incorporated into their final written free assignment. In addition to the feedback students received in the workshops, I would also provide feedback on student papers.

2.1 Writing Workshop 1

The first workshop covered the interpretive essay, a three-page piece of writing reflecting a close analysis of reading from the course. Students were placed in small groups, given five days to draft written feedback to their group members, and then met during an hour of class to discuss their feedback.

My approach to organizing groups for the first workshop was as follows:

- After students submitted the assignment, I created writing workshop groups on Absalon and posted the essays of all group members in an announcement to the group.
- Group size was kept to four to five students (approximately nine to twelve pages of reading) in order to avoid overloading students with reading.
- Some students had elected to write the papers in groups, in which case the authors of a paper were assigned to the same writing workshop group.
- Each student would prepare individual comments on the other papers, even if they had written the assignment as a group.
- Rather than assign groups at random, I chose to look through the papers and make sure groups would address a variety of topics. The aim was to use group discussion not only to work on writing, but also to cover an extensive amount of material from the semester.

I provided instructions for constructing feedback (See Figure 1). Students were to draft one to two paragraphs of written feedback. I opted not to provide a form or questionnaire. The assignment had intentionally been kept to a short three pages in order to emphasize depth of engagement with peer work.

How to prepare for the workshop

To prepare for the workshop on Monday, please read the other papers carefully but generously. Consider what works well in the paper and what isn't as clear or persuasive. Keep in mind the kind of feedback you would want on your own work and try to provide that kind of commentary. Start with addressing the big picture, focusing on the larger ideas before getting into the line by line.

Please write up 1-2 paragraphs for each paper that sum up the main points that you want to provide as feedback. You will be explaining and discussing these main points during the workshop. Groups 1-5 have four papers in the group, which will give you about 15 minutes to discuss each paper. Group 6 has three papers, and will have 20 minutes per paper. You can also make detailed remarks on the paper if you want, but you likely won't have time to get into line edits. Please keep your feedback constructive. This doesn't mean that you can't be critical or have extensive comments and questions, but remember that these are your peers who were willing to share their work with you and take their time to read your writing.

Figure 1 - Instructions for preparing feedback

Twenty-five students out of thirty-seven participated in the first workshop. They were organized into six groups. Based on my observations of the groups, most participants had prepared written comments. Many groups were slow to begin their discussion, but all of the groups maintained a focused conversation for a majority of the hour. All of the groups were keeping time in order to ensure that they addressed all of the papers provided. Two groups completed their discussion of the papers before the hour. One group concluded a few minutes after the hour and might have benefited from additional time.

2.2 Writing Workshop 2

The second writing workshop covered the five-page comparative essay in which students would produce a detailed comparison between two theorists from the course. Students were given the option to either expand their interpretive essay and incorporate feedback from the first workshop or draft completely new writing. This option was important because some students did not participate in the first workshop. Others had discovered new material that they planned to address in the final exam.

The original plan for the second writing workshop had been the same as the first: students would submit assignments, those assignments would be separated into groups, students would draft feedback, and feedback would be discussed during class time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and University closure, I opted to change the format slightly so that students would be providing only written feedback. While small group discussions facilitated online would likely have been more beneficial, time constraints and logistical difficulties precluded such an option.

Ten students out of thirty-seven participated in the second workshop. This sharp decline in student participation has numerous possible causes. General attendance and participation in the course declined after the University closure for COVID-19. The shift to an all-online written format may have also deterred some students who would have preferred the discussion of the first workshop. Despite the reduced participation, students who did take part in the workshop provided extensive feedback on both subject matter of the course and writing technique. Due to the options built into the assignment, the nature of student feedback differed greatly, ranging from close analysis of specific sentences and paragraphs to overarching reflections on the effectiveness of argument and structure. The majority of student feedback demonstrated time and effort invested in the activity.

3.0 Evaluating the Workshop

3.1 Instructor Evaluation

Over the course of planning both workshops and during the student meetings of the first workshop, I recorded my reflections on the process in order to retain my immediate impressions for the purpose of meaningful consideration upon conclusion of the workshop. In terms of organizing the workshop, the time requirement is noticeable but not excessive. Sorting the students into groups, posting papers on Absalon, and sending appropriate announcements took most of a morning, but this process was already more efficient by the time I organized the second workshop. This would become more efficient in future iterations of the workshop, where the process would be familiar and many existing drafts of announcements could be reused. The random group assignment function in Absalon or the use of Peergrade could further speed up the process.

Based on my observations and brief discussions with a few groups during the first workshop, students seemed engaged by the format. Student participation during the workshop appeared even higher than during the small discussion groups utilized in the course. This was likely a result of advanced preparation on the part of the students. Discussions with students and emails leading up to the workshop suggested that students took preparation for the workshop seriously. Student

questions regarding procedures were minimal, suggesting that these had been communicated effectively. However, student evaluations would be required to confirm these impressions.

I noted the following potential obstacles and challenges during the planning and facilitation of the workshop:

- *Student level of study:* The course included students at both the bachelor's and master's levels. I wondered if, as a result, students earlier in their studies might feel overwhelmed and/or more advanced students might not feel challenged. However, the unique pedagogic value of peer feedback seemed well suited to this dynamic. Students at all levels would learn not only from the feedback they received, but also from the process of formulating feedback.
- *Exam Format:* The writing workshop would seem to be ideal for a course with a portfolio final exam. In that case, the workshop could serve not only as an activity but also as part of the exam process. Workshop groups could be kept the same throughout the semester, and the workshop would likely have nearly full participation. Despite this potential improvement, the writing workshop still appeared beneficial with a free written final exam, and the format could be adapted to benefit most courses with an emphasis on writing.
- *Student absence:* Student absences on the day of the workshop discussions could leave other groups members with less feedback and frustrated with the process of writing feedback for someone who did not participate. Fortunately, only one student of those who submitted papers missed the workshop. The student contacted me in advance to inform me of the absence and the other group members seemed relatively unaffected by the absence. It would be helpful to have a contingency plan in the case of numerous student absences.
- *COVID-19 pandemic and University closure:* It bears mention that these workshops were conducted in Spring 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first workshop occurred shortly before the university closure and the second workshop occurred after the shift to online instruction. Students faces increased stress, complications from an altered study environment, and contending demands on their time. Many exchange students were required to uproot mid-semester and return to their home institutions. Such a major interruption in the course of study and in daily life likely had effects on student participation, attention, and involvement.

3.2 Student Evaluation

Following the completion of the second workshop, students were asked to complete evaluations. The evaluations were conducted anonymously using Padlet. Questions covered the amount of time used to prepare for each workshop, the clarity of organization, the perceived usefulness of providing and receiving feedback, what worked best about the workshop, and possibilities for improvement. (See Appendix 1 for a complete list of questions).

Six students completed the evaluation of the workshops, providing a relatively narrow window into student assessment of the activity. Of those who responded, four had participated in both workshops, one had participated in only the first workshop, and one had participated in only the second workshop. Students spent anywhere from a total of forty-five minutes to four hours preparing for the workshops.

Students expressed strong support for the workshops. All of the students stated that the workshops were clearly organized and found the process of both giving and receiving feedback useful.

Comments on the value of feedback suggested that the workshop provided valuable writing instruction and improved student understanding of course content. In response to questions about the usefulness of the workshop, students emphasized the value of receiving my comments on their papers in addition to the comments of their peers. Multiple students noted that their groups took the assignment seriously and clearly put effort into their feedback. I was concerned that the workshop might be a bad fit for the written free assignment exam, but students noted an appreciation for the structure of the writing workshop in relation to the final assignment (see Figure 2). While a portfolio exam might compel widespread participation in the workshop, I suspect that those who already chose to participate in the workshop appreciated the opportunity to experiment with ideas and work through the writing process prior before having their work graded. The workshops provided a low stress environment to improve writing and discuss course content, yet, importantly, this relaxed environment was still a place of serious intellectual engagement. The tradeoff between extent of participation and depth of student engagement is something to be considered in future workshop design.



Figure 2 - Comments on workshop and exam

Although student impressions of the workshop were generally positive, they noted possible improvements. Four of six evaluations thought the workshop would have been improved had more class time been devoted to discussing writing in political theory. I devoted a small amount of time early in the semester to this topic, but this time could be extended in order to reiterate the systematic discussion of writing that students receive in the core courses in the specialization in Political Theory. Many of the students in the class have not received a comprehensive introduction to academic writing in general and political theory in particular, and even those who have can benefit from revisiting writing fundamentals. Students also expressed a desire for a more extensive follow up to the writing workshop. They suggested that I set aside some class time following the workshop to address general issues and recurring problems and devote additional time to the discussion of how to incorporate comments. I offered some summary comments following the first workshop, and these could easily be expanded to address student concerns.

Although student evaluations provide important insights into the student experience, relying exclusively on student evaluations can create a problem of measuring student satisfaction but not student learning (Deslauriers, et al. 2019). My contemporaneous notes on the workshop served as one additional point of reference with which to evaluate the workshop. In the future, it would be productive to compare student evaluations with improvements in learning outcome. Doing so would guarantee that students' impressions of their own learning correspond to actual student learning.

4.0 Conclusion

This project suggests that peer feedback writing workshops are worthwhile activities with benefits for students writing and engagement with course material. From an instructor's perspective, they require a moderate amount of preparation in order to generate deeply engaged student participation, extensive critical thinking, and improved focus on writing. Student evaluations reflect similar conclusions about the writing workshops. While students offered various ways to improve the workshops, there was consensus among those who completed evaluations that the writing workshops were a worthwhile or even highly productive use of their time.

Numerous improvements are possible in the structure and implementation of peer feedback writing workshops. Greater levels of structure could be added prior to, during, and following the workshops. Students expressed a desire to receive additional instruction in writing prior to the assignments. This might include models of papers that demonstrate effective elements of writing or a pre-workshop practice sessions where students comment on a sample paper during fifteen minutes of class in the week or two leading up to the workshop. To provide additional structure during the workshop, the instructor might provide detailed guiding questions or a full rubric for students to apply to their peers' writing. Alternatively, students could construct this rubric as a class and in conversation with the instructor. Following the workshop, students could be required to submit a summary of the revisions made because of peer comments. Peer feedback can be made more effective by requiring students to justify how it is used and incorporated (Gielen, Tops, et al. 2010, 157).

In the workshops in this project, I provided instructor feedback in addition to the peer feedback. In future semesters, different configurations of peer feedback and instructor feedback could be tested. It seems particularly promising to provide a combination of instructor and peer feedback on one assignment and peer feedback only on a subsequent assignment. The first assignment would satisfy a preference expressed by multiple students in their evaluations for a combination of feedback from peers and the instructor. The second assignment would encourage the cultivation of effective study and writing practices that function independent of the instructor.

Surprisingly, the format of the exam turned out not to be a major obstacle. Within this project, the workshop was part of a lead up to a free written assignment and therefore was not compulsory. Participation in the second workshop was low, but it is unclear that this was the result of a lack of student interest. The second workshop occurred shortly after the closure of the University of Copenhagen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and many students were more focused on taking precautions to stay healthy, making plans in order to continue their studies, relocating to the countries of their home institutions, and figuring out new arrangements to balance work and home life. Optional assignments were deemed low priority. Those students who did participate in the workshops found them rewarding and productive. Some even seemed to suggest that the ability to work through ideas in ungraded assignments prior to the final had its own benefits. There may be a tradeoff between making the workshop compulsory in order to guarantee participation and creating an environment for serious feedback but without the added stressor of grading.

Regardless of the details of the design of the writing workshops, instructors should be sure to communicate the format and expectations as clearly as possible. As long as the students have a sense of what they are trying to achieve, this will likely be a rewarding activity. This project suggests that peer feedback writing workshops provide a productive technique for developing effective academic writing, sustained engagement with course material, and students' abilities to comment on other academic work.

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Appendix 1

Student Evaluation of Writing Workshop

1. Did you participate in the first, second, or both workshops?
2. Approximately how much time did you spend preparing feedback for the workshop(s)?
3. Were the workshops organized clearly?
4. Did you find the feedback that you received useful?
5. Did you find the process of providing feedback useful?
6. What worked best about the writing workshop(s)?
7. What could be improved about the writing workshop(s)?
8. Do you have any other comments regarding the writing workshops?