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Kelly N. Tracy  
*Western Carolina University, kntracy@wcu.edu*

Lydia J. Foust  
*Cullowhee Valley School, lfoust@jcpsmail.org*

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## **Partnering Pre-Service Teachers with First-Grade Writers: An Exploration of Giving Effective Feedback**

Kelly N. Tracy, *Western Carolina University*  
Lydia J. Foust, *Cullowhee Valley School*

*“I really enjoyed the writing buddy system that we did with Mountain Dale School [pseudonym]! It was such a great experience for us to practice providing feedback. I am really grateful for the communication and feedback in this class. We discussed feedback, we were given feedback, and we gave feedback. I think this is an important topic for us to cover.”* [Student course evaluation]

These were the final evaluative comments from one pre-service teacher after completing a course that included an additional, primarily virtual, field experience focused on feedback and student writing. The work paired 15 first graders who were in the process of creating a class book composed of their individual informational texts with 27 pre-service teachers enrolled in a language arts methods course. While these pre-service teachers were also in a separate, one-day-per-week field experience, this additional partnership allowed for a collective experience centered around using feedback with young writers.

In this article, we share the relatively simple design of this partnership project, the benefits we observed for the pre-service teachers, and the possibilities for further improvement and research.

### **Supporting Literature**

#### **Quality Feedback**

Feedback has long been viewed as a critical component of teaching and learning (Black & William, 1998; Hattie, 2009), but it is also complex. Not all feedback results in positive outcomes; some feedback may even have the opposite effect (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Hattie and Timperley (2007) help us understand that effective feedback has multiple layers. They begin by defining the intent of feedback as reducing discrepancies between the current level of understanding and the desired goal and note that feedback can come from a variety of sources. Further, Hattie and Timperley (2007) outline conditions that

affect the quality and use of feedback, including the clarity of the goal, the commitment of the student to achieving the goal, ensuring there is information about progress and how to move forward, as well as an opportunity to do so. Feedback can be task or process oriented, or it may be about self-regulation. Just as important, feedback that is personal or praise-oriented (“good” or “smart”) is typically ineffective (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

There are many decisions that teachers make when offering feedback. For example, when should it be given and how often? How much feedback should there be? Should it be verbal, written, or visual? Is it for an individual, a group, or the whole class? In addition, tone, clarity, and specificity affect the quality of feedback. The words we use and what we focus on can influence a student’s willingness to receive the feedback (Brookhart, 2017). One study of Australian secondary students indicated that students perceived feedback as most useful when it was clear and encouraging, individualized, and suggested ways to improve (van der Kleij, 2019). Feedback is of little benefit if students do not receive and use it (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). To be impactful, formative feedback happens in a cycle. There is instruction, feedback, and an opportunity to use the feedback (Brookhart, 2017).

### **Learning to Give Feedback**

Given the variability of feedback and its importance in learning and teaching, helping pre-service teachers understand how to give feedback is a critical, but often difficult, component of their learning (Gotwals & Birmingham, 2015; Grainger & Adie, 2014; Ropohl & Rönnebeck, 2019). As pre-service teachers learn about the qualities of effective feedback, they can practice applying this knowledge to different contexts and content areas, such as writing.

Some studies have examined how pre-service teachers’ opportunities to give students feedback on their writing have led to growth in their learning. For example, Thomas and Sondergeld (2015) found improvement in pre-service teachers’ abilities, confidence, and beliefs about giving feedback after they engaged in an online field experience where they gave middle school students feedback on their writing. The middle schoolers also saw positive impacts. In a similar study, Lehman and colleagues (2019) found positive outcomes for their pre-service teachers and middle school students as they engaged in a semester-long partnership that offered generative feedback from pre-service teachers to students. In both of these examples, the researchers emphasize the need to model and support pre-service teachers in giving writers feedback that is timely and matches the goal of the writing.

### **Why Writing?**

Preparing pre-service teachers to teach writing and giving them experiences that help them practice what they are learning is critical. Research has shown that many teachers feel underprepared to teach writing (Brindle et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2014) and that many teacher preparation programs do not include coursework or field experiences that focus on teaching writing (Graham et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2016).

We saw this partnership of pre-service teachers and young writers as a chance to enhance pre-service teachers' understanding of evidence-based practices in the teaching of writing and to witness the developmental nature of writing. While the primary evidence-based practice we focused on was providing effective feedback, we also highlighted several other essential practices. These writing instructional practices included the following: extended opportunities for students to write; teaching students strategies for their writing process, most specifically planning and revision; attending to audience and purpose; and publishing writing that extends to the community beyond the classroom (Graham et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2018).

Graham and colleagues (2022) posit:

If students with and without disabilities are to receive writing instruction that addresses their needs, colleges of education must ensure that their graduates have been trained to effectively provide evidence-based writing instruction. Improving preservice teachers' skill sets for teaching writing will require a commitment to providing adequate coursework (i.e., a course focused on writing instruction similar to preparation in other academic domains) or more strategic practicum experiences teaching writing. (p. 15)

### **Our Feedback Partnership Project**

Knowing how important feedback is for both pre-service teachers and students, as well as the importance of an emphasis on teaching writing, this project brought together a group of first-grade writers and a class of pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers would serve as feedback partners as the first graders wrote a class informational book that would be published in hard copy using an online company (Studenttreasures). Graham and colleagues (2015) note that students' writing improves when they receive formative feedback during their everyday writing. Although we anticipated benefits to the first-grade students, in this article we focus on the pre-service teachers.

## **Context of the Partnership**

To fully understand this project, it is helpful to give some context to the relationship between the authors and where the idea for this work came from. Lydia, now a second-year teacher, was an undergraduate in two of Kelly's literacy courses as part of her inclusive/special education degree. The first was a children's literature course where Lydia completed a project that included writing, illustrating, and publishing a book through an online program (Studenttreasures). The second was a language arts methods course focused on the teaching of writing.

As a beginning teacher, Lydia has made writing a priority. She reached out to Kelly to ask about the book project she had completed as an undergraduate, hoping her students could publish a class book together and each get a copy. The online publisher provided one complimentary hard copy for the class, but additional books were about \$20 each. While this amount was small for some families of Lydia's students, it was not for many. Lydia wanted to ensure that all students got a copy of the book they helped write, so she wrote a small partnership grant with Kelly funded through the university. This \$400 grant allowed every student to have their own copy of the book. In addition, it sparked the idea to have the pre-service teachers in Kelly's class become feedback partners and to do a publication celebration for these young authors. While we see the ability to buy each child a copy of the book as a plus, we also believe that others might engage in a similar project without funding.

The book coincided with Lydia's thematic study of animals, which was part of her required reading curriculum. Each first grader selected an animal, researched it, and composed an informational text about the animal. Key learning objectives for this writing were for students to write a topic sentence, include two research-verified facts about their animal, and write a concluding statement. Additionally, students were expected to use complete sentences, correct punctuation, and conventional spelling. Lydia taught about these expectations in class as her students drafted their writing. These expectations were shared with the pre-service teachers so that they understood the writing goals and could focus their feedback accordingly.

### **The Pre-Service Teachers**

Each first grader was paired with one or two pre-service teachers enrolled in Kelly's language arts methods course. We referred to these pairings as "writing buddies." In total, there were 27 pre-service teachers in the course who were majoring in either elementary education or inclusive/special education. These pre-service teachers were in the second semester of their junior year. They were currently taking a series of four methods courses accompanied by a one-day-per-week field experience in an elementary general education classroom (not in the same school as their writing buddies). Thus, the writing buddy experience was an additional opportunity to practice what they were learning in the college classroom

with students. The pairings of the pre-service teachers and the first-graders were strategic. For example, the first graders whose first language was not English were paired with pre-service teachers that had Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) as a minor.

### **The Initial Videos**

While the university and the elementary school were geographically close, logistics around scheduling and safety protocols related to COVID-19 meant multiple face-to-face feedback sessions would be challenging, so Lydia and Kelly decided to use a virtual platform for the buddies to communicate. This would enable timely feedback and give all participants opportunities to engage with educational technology, as well as practice their speaking and listening skills. After considering various possibilities (e.g., Google Meets, VoiceThread, etc.), we settled on using Flipgrid. Flipgrid is a free online tool that allows for video and comments. It can be kept private and used across platforms. Educators have successfully used Flipgrid to improve learning (Green & Green, 2018; Gurjar, 2022). The simplicity, free use, and accessibility aspects, such as closed captions and transcript downloads, drew us to Flipgrid. Lydia and Kelly were “co-leads” on the Flipgrid site, meaning they both were able to edit, manage membership, approve responses, and create topics. This feature made our collaboration even easier.

Our first videos on the site were to build community and to practice using Flipgrid. The pre-service teachers made a collective welcome video for the entire first-grade class and individual videos for their writing buddies. In these initial individual videos, the pre-service teachers were charged with enthusiastically introducing themselves and letting their buddies know their favorite animals. The videos were short, approximately 30-45 seconds. Lydia played these individual videos for the whole class to generate enthusiasm, and then she assisted her students in making individual welcome videos in response.

In addition to these introductory videos, Lydia created a video for the pre-service teachers that discussed specifically what the first graders were working on with their writing, the graphic organizer they were using for their planning, and the goals she hoped the pre-service teachers would focus on with their feedback. Additionally, she showed a few examples of first-grade writing and a copy of the checklist she and her students would use to assess their writing. This upfront work enabled the pre-service teachers to clearly understand the expectations and goals that Lydia had outlined for her students.

### **Learning in the Classrooms**

Throughout the time we were making these initial videos, the students in both classrooms were busy learning about writing. The first graders were researching their animals as they planned and drafted their books. Meanwhile, the

pre-service teachers were learning about giving feedback in the context of a writing classroom. Informed by the work of Hattie and Timperley (2007), as well as Brookhart's (2017) book, *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*, the pre-service teachers started by thinking about the purpose of feedback, qualities of effective feedback (e.g., timely and specific), and how to offer feedback to young writers. Additionally, they considered characteristics of high-quality writing and how they could use feedback to affirm what students were doing well as they pushed them to improve based on the goals for the writing.

It was important for the pre-service teachers to practice reviewing student writing and giving feedback prior to offering feedback to their writing buddies. To scaffold this, the class read a piece of first-grade writing together. They used the writing checklist from Lydia's class to consider strengths and areas of improvement. The pre-service teachers verbalized with a partner the specific feedback that they would give this student, making sure the feedback included something the student did well as well as something the student could improve on. This feedback needed to be specific but not nit-picky, given in student-friendly language, and avoid personal comments (e.g., "You're so smart! You're such a good writer!"). The pre-service teachers also practiced this sort of feedback as they learned about student-teacher writing conferences. The pre-service teachers read about effective conferences and watched videos of student-teacher writing conferences. They practiced conference skills as a whole class with guidance from Kelly on how to read a piece of writing with a student, consider and share what the writer did well, and identify an improvement area. An important part of this work was to recognize that too much feedback on too many things is typically ineffective (Graham, 2018). They discussed using questioning in conferences, identifying what the writing needs to improve on, and how to encourage the writer to use the given feedback. The pre-service teachers then practiced conferring with a partner by using different samples of student writing and taking turns in the role of teacher and student.

In the midst of the pre-service teachers learning about feedback, the first graders made individual videos where they shared what animal they were researching and some facts that they had learned. We decided we would try out a written response from the pre-service teachers posted as a reply to the first-grade videos. These responses focused on helping with topic sentences as the students began drafting. Kelly modeled for students what this written feedback might look like, and then the pre-service teachers crafted their own feedback statements to share with their buddies. Here is an example of that feedback:

You gave us an awesome fact about King Cobras. You told us that they can swim faster than humans using their hood. We didn't know that! This will make a great detail in your writing. What will your topic sentence be? We

are writing about dogs and our topic sentence will be “Dogs are our favorite animal because they are loyal, energetic, and cuddly.” We can't wait to read more about King Cobras and see what you come up with.

The first graders all received their feedback and were able to use it as they drafted their topic sentences and facts about their animals. This immediate use of feedback is in-line with Brookhart's (2017) notion that students need an opportunity to use the feedback they receive. Once the first graders had their topic sentences written, Lydia had the students record themselves reading them. She then sent copies of these drafts to the pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers watched the videos, read the drafts, and considered the checklist Lydia provided to help them determine their next round of feedback. This time, the pre-service teachers responded with feedback through a video posted on Flipgrid. Here is a transcript from one of those videos:

Hi, Braxton [all student names are pseudonyms]! We had a chance to read your writing and we noticed that you had three really interesting facts and used large vocabulary words. We think ending your writing with a closing sentence would be a good idea. An example of this would be, “In conclusion, ball pythons are a cool snake species.” Bye, Braxton! We can't wait to read more of your writing.

Again, the first graders watched these videos and considered this feedback as they revised their drafts. They then sent over these revised drafts for their buddies to review. In response, the pre-service teachers sent them a final round of feedback via video. Here is a transcript from one of those videos:

Hi Jacob, we just read your second draft, and we were blown away. Your topic sentence is amazing. We love that you use three descriptive words. Maybe with your final draft, you can include some examples of food that they eat. For example, you said that they eat fish, but specifically what kinds do they eat the most? Keep up the great work. We can't wait to see your final draft.

This exchange of multiple drafts allowed the pre-service teachers to see revision and editing in action. In class, they had been learning about writing as a process and the need for students to have regular writing time (Graham et al., 2018), so this was another way their learning was reinforced.

In the culminating set of videos, the first graders read their final drafts that would be published in their class book, and the pre-service teachers made a final congratulatory video. Lydia sent her students' work to Studenttreasures for



publication, and she and Kelly began planning an author's celebration to bring the buddies together in person.

### **The Final Celebration**

Approximately one month after their final video exchange, the first graders boarded a school bus and headed over to the campus of their writing buddies for a celebration of their published work. The celebration began with snacks and icebreaker activities. Then, the first graders practiced reading their writing to their buddy before going to the front of the classroom and reading their piece aloud to the group. As each first grader went to the microphone to share, their work was displayed behind them on a screen using the document camera, and the pre-service teachers who were their buddies stood with them for encouragement. This final exchange allowed the pre-service teachers to see the value of audience and publishing beyond the classroom walls (Graham, et al., 2016). In addition, it was a way for the pre-service teachers to see the final results of the feedback they had given. As one pre-service teacher put it, "We were also able to practice giving feedback to our writing buddies, and those buddies showed us how they used our feedback to help their writing (during their writing celebration)!"

### **Evaluating the Experience**

We explored the value of the buddy experience for pre-service teachers through a simple post-survey and pre-service teacher written responses on what they learned in the course. We then compared this to the transcripts of the video feedback to see if what they said they learned was evident in their practice.

### **Survey**

In a simple survey of the pre-service teachers and first graders, all but one rated the experience as a five on a scale of 1-5 (with five being the best). The other rated it as a 4. When asked what they learned, the first graders indicated they had learned many facts about the animals they researched, how to write a topic sentence, how to write a conclusion, and how to read their writing in front of others. The pre-service teachers shared that they learned how to give feedback, more about expectations for writing in first grade (including not underestimating their abilities), and pay attention to students' perspectives. The overwhelming suggestion from participants was an opportunity to meet in person more often and have more time with their buddies.

### **Written Responses**

In addition to this survey, other indicators demonstrate the value of this project and what the pre-service teachers took away from it. When asked to name ten important ideas from the course as part of their final course task, 24 of 27 pre-

service teachers (88%) specifically identified “feedback,” making it one of the most consistent responses across the class. Of the three that did not, one included the idea of writing buddies, and one referred to the importance of student-teacher writing conferences but not specifically to the feedback ideas we learned. One had no reference to ideas related directly to the project. Here is one example of what a pre-service teacher shared:

Feedback in writing is important because it bridges the gap between where the writer is at now in their writing, and where their writing has potential to be. Feedback is for students to know what they are doing well at in their writing and what areas need improvement. It is important for the reviewer to give good feedback. For feedback to be good, the reviewer/teacher should start by affirming what was done well and then give specific guidance for improvement. The reviewer/ teacher should avoid personal comments when giving feedback (ex. “So Smart!”) and be specific in what needs to be improved but not nitpicky.

### ***Analysis of the Responses***

To help us understand the pre-service teachers’ responses, we entered the 24 responses related to feedback into a table. We read each response individually, creating a running list of ideas we noted within responses. Based on this list, we created the following codes: importance, negative/improve, positive/affirm, specific, motivation, and personal. We coded each response for these ideas and added a column for any additional information.

### ***Understanding of Feedback***

This closer examination of the 24 responses on feedback showed us that within their responses, all 24 pre-service teachers identified that feedback should include what students were doing well, as well as an area of improvement. This idea is important because pre-service teachers may think of feedback as being only positive or negative. For example, a pre-service teacher, Kim, stated that prior to this experience, “I believed feedback was simply getting criticism from my teachers and professors.”

Their understanding of the importance of feedback that affirms what is going well and shares how to improve was confirmed when reviewing the transcripts of their video feedback. In *all* instances of feedback, the pre-service teachers shared with students something they had done well in their writing and a way to improve. Here is an example of that feedback:

We read your new writing and we noticed that you used interesting facts about dogs and also wrote a good topic sentence. We thought your writing

could be improved by writing a conclusion sentence to end your writing. An example of this could be ‘In conclusion, dogs are my favorite animal because they are loyal.’

Twelve of the 24 pre-service teachers who discussed feedback in their responses stated that it should be specific. While only half discussed this in their response, examples of specificity can be seen in *all* of the feedback transcripts, particularly in how the pre-service teachers name what they see in students’ writing. Here is an excerpt from one of those transcripts: “Another thing I noticed is that you included three really great details about the Arctic Fox. Now I wonder if there’s a way that we could take those three details and make them all connect together.”

Only six of the 24 responses on feedback noted that it should avoid personal comments. This seems to be a particularly difficult aspect of feedback that the pre-service teachers need to continue to develop. While their feedback to their buddies and their final responses give clear evidence of their ability to name specific strengths in student writing and to note an area of growth, it also shows how hard it is not to make personal, evaluative comments, like when this pair of pre-service teachers shared the following feedback:

You did a really great job on this writing. Your topic sentence was really strong and the overall improvement with your details and vocabulary was really great. We really like how you incorporated more information about the sea anemones. So, what we want to ask you is what plants and animals do clownfish eat? Overall, we think that this last writing was really good and you could improve it even further.

This example shows how they note specific positives and use questioning to help the student add details (although they could be more explicit here). However, they are having difficulty moving away from words like “we like” and “great job.” This will take continued practice and likely needs more emphasis within the class.

### **Learning Beyond Feedback**

While the focus on the work with writing buddies was clearly feedback, there were many other aspects of teaching writing that the pre-service teachers could connect to through this partnership. It may seem obvious, but this project was a chance for the pre-service teachers to see students in the act of writing and to understand the need for explicit instruction in aspects of writing, such as organizational structure and conventions. These were concepts we were learning about in class and that the pre-service teachers were working to include in a writing lesson in their one-day-per-week field experience. Even though these pre-service

teachers were all in a one-day-per-week placement in an elementary classroom, the attention to teaching writing varied widely across classrooms; this project gave them a shared context for the ideas they were learning about in class and an opportunity for some hands-on experience *before* attempting to teach a writing lesson.

Even after the actual feedback process was complete, the value of the experience and the connections it allowed pre-service teachers to make to the classroom was evident. For example, when learning about foundational skills such as handwriting and spelling, the pre-service teachers could go back to their experience with their writing buddies. We could use their informational pieces as examples. Additionally, the culminating final book allowed the pre-service teachers to see the wide range of development within one group of first graders.

### **Considerations for the Next Iteration**

This first iteration of our project allowed the pre-service teachers an opportunity to consider feedback on student writing. They clearly took away the notion of the value of feedback and some sense of its complexity (Brookhart, 2017). In considering how to strengthen this experience, further emphasizing the research on effective feedback, including explicit discussions of the potentially negative impacts of feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), would likely be beneficial. This focus on the research may help the pre-service teachers more fully understand the importance of not making feedback personal (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), something they had difficulty with. In addition, giving the pre-service teachers further practice in writing and verbalizing feedback and then evaluating it against the discussed criteria for effective feedback *before* engaging in feedback with the actual students would likely be helpful. In essence, these students need feedback on their feedback. To scaffold this, the pre-service teachers could first look at feedback examples from others and evaluate and revise using the stated criteria.

As mentioned earlier, the pre-service teachers overwhelmingly suggested that the way to improve this project was more face-to-face time with the first graders. This ranged from allowing for an in-person meeting at the start of the program, to virtual “real-time” meetings, to being in-person instead of via video. Still, the participants found this experience valuable and understood the practicality of using Flipgrid. As one pre-service teacher wrote, “I would’ve loved to do this in person, but with our schedules and [field] placement, I think Flipgrid worked perfectly.” Digital tools like Flipgrid allow pre-service teachers to have additional experiences working with students in the field (Thomas & Sondergeld, 2015). We believe this project could be done entirely virtually, including the final celebration, and still have positive outcomes for all participants. We see the flexibility of this project that Flipgrid afforded and the ease of implementation as one of its greatest assets.

Future research could look more deeply at such a project, whether fully virtual or hybrid, in varied ways, including by examining the benefits to the first-grade students. Additional data could be collected on the long-term use of what pre-service teachers learned and on the transfer to feedback in other subjects. Various iterations of this project could be tried to see what is most impactful in helping pre-service teachers understand how to give, and help students use, feedback.

### Conclusion

Giving feedback is an important skill for educators, but it is potentially a difficult one to develop (Gotwals & Birmingham, 2015; Grainger & Adie, 2014; Ropohl & Rönnebeck, 2019). As with previous research on pre-service teacher feedback (Lehman, Martin, & Rogers, 2019; Thomas & Sondergeld, 2015), we saw positive outcomes for the pre-service teachers, as well as a need for continued practice, particularly with not making feedback personal. The use of a virtual platform for feedback allowed us to have flexibility while also allowing students to try out an educational tool.

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