

On the Use of Criteria-based Peer Feedback in Online Preparation Courses for the Digital TestDaF – Assumptions, Implementation and Reflections

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Abstract *In many educational contexts, learning a language may serve as a means to achieve life-planning goals, and in some cases, language test results can impact critical decisions, such as pursuing Higher Education (HE) abroad. It is therefore not surprising that in language courses for test preparation, learners often focus their efforts on passing the test instead of improving their language competences more generally and therefore prefer traditional preparation approaches like teaching to the test to alternative teaching methods. In this article, we propose a learning-oriented approach to exam preparation including engagement with peer feedback in order to raise test takers' awareness of key factors for the successful handling of language situations during their studies. We describe how and why criteria-based peer feedback is implemented in an online test preparation course for the digital TestDaF, a high-stake standardized language proficiency test for language admission to HE in Germany. Furthermore, we report on tutors' and course participants' opinions about giving peer feedback.*

Keywords *peer assessment; test preparation; online language learning; learner autonomy; learning-oriented assessment*

1. Introduction

Feedback is one of the key factors for learning regardless of the context (cf. Hattie & Timperley, 2007). To be effective, it has to meet a number of criteria. In her 2022 review of pertinent literature on feedback, Schluer identified the following aspects: feedback should be based on transparent assessment criteria, it should provide reasons why something is (in)correct and suggestions for improvement, it should be specific, structured and easy to follow, personalized and individualized and, more importantly, it should be provided quickly and on a regular basis (Schluer, 2022, pp. 29–30). Another important factor is students' active involvement with feedback.

Traditionally, feedback has been seen as a quite unidirectional information transmission process from teachers to learners about the gap between the learners' current level of performance and the learning goal referred to. In recent years, especially with the increasing relevance of learner autonomy and cooperative learning, alternative and more dialogue-based types of feedback, such as peer feedback, have received a lot of attention (Tsagari et al., 2018).

After providing an overview of current research on peer feedback in foreign language learning (section 2), this article describes the implementation and rationale behind criteria-based peer feedback within an online test preparation course for the digital TestDaF, a high-stakes standardized language proficiency examination for admission to Higher Education institutions in Germany (section 3). Subsequently, the paper reports on the experience of both tutors and course participants with peer feedback (section 4).

2. On the Role of Peer Feedback in Language Learning and Test Preparation

Peer feedback is usually applied for assessing oral and written performances and can be done in pairs or groups. The distinct feature of peer feedback, defined by Topping (2017) as "an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners" (p. 1), is the role learners play in the learning process. Learners are not merely the receivers of feedback, they are the ones who give feedback and thus perform the role of a teacher or a rater. This alternative role in a learning process leads to several benefits for the learners: the learners can improve their reflection skills and become more autonomous and more critical of their own learning outcomes (e.g. Yu & Lee, 2016), they spend more time on task, are more motivated and get a greater quantity of feedback. At the same time, the implementation of peer feedback is time consuming for language learners, and especially without prior experience, learners may not always actively engage in peer feedback. Moreover, it is not always as accurate as teachers' feedback and is not always perceived as the most helpful type of feedback in comparison to teachers' feedback (Hansen Edwards, 2013).

As there is no one and only way to implement peer feedback, the implementation can differ in terms of mode (face-to-face, online, pen and paper), frequency of use, and form (rubrics, open-ended questions, etc.). However, in previous research one can find several suggestions for implementing peer feedback: Students should receive training to conduct peer feedback and should be involved in developing the evaluation criteria (cf. Liu & Carless, 2006; Peng, 2009). Peer feedback should be used with other types of assessment methods, such as collaborative assessment or self-assessments. Prior to the actual peer feedback activity, there should be opportunities for practicing peer feedback and discussion (Liu & Carless, 2006). It is advisable to limit feedback to clear and broad ratings instead of overly detailed ones (cf. Peng, 2009). Finally, thorough planning and thoughtful design should go into the peer feedback activity, and it should be conducted anonymously.

When preparing for high stakes tests, such as university admission tests, studies on test preparation practices and preferences indicate that prospective test-takers around the globe are very much interested in knowing whether a certain performance is suffi-

cient to pass the test, e.g. by getting feedback from language teachers (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Furthermore, they have a clear preference for test-taking skills over general language learning. In their review of studies on test preparation practices and preferences, Zimmermann et al. (2024) found that potential test candidates worldwide tend to prepare themselves by downloading and working through sample tests and exercises based on test task types.

In order to better understand the context of the online test preparation course we developed and the reasons for implementing peer feedback activities in this course, we will give a description of the test. The TestDaF, a standardized language proficiency test officially recognized for language admission to HE in Germany (Norris & Drackert, 2018), focuses on tasks that elicit competencies for participation in the academic discourse (cf. Kecker & Eckes, 2022). The digital TestDaF comprises a total of 23 tasks organized in four test sections: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The tasks are based on relevant communicative situations in HE contexts such as extracting information from written and spoken texts, comparing and producing summaries of texts and graphs, reacting to statements of others and expressing one's opinion. Besides tasks focusing on just one skill, there are several integrated tasks addressing more than one language skills.

In our opinion, test preparation for a language admission test like the digital TestDaF should comprise more than the mere familiarization with test tasks and test-taking strategies. Learners should not only know the task types of the test, but should also reflect on how relevant these tasks are for effective communication in a Higher Education context. This could not only increase test takers' chances to attain a high test score, but can also help them to reach their long term goal of studying in Germany. Hence, an approach for test preparation that is based on the principles of learning-oriented assessment (LOA) as described by Carless (2007) seemed useful for this intention. Among the three principles of LOA are 1) "assessment tasks as learning tasks", 2) "student involvement", and 3) "feedback as feedforward" (p. 57). It is mostly the second principle we would like to focus on in our argument for using peer feedback in the context of preparation for high stakes language tests. According to this principle, students should be involved in the assessment by "actively engaging with criteria, quality, their own and/or peers' performance" (Carless 2007, p. 60). Self and peer evaluation activities might be good ways to encourage students to actively seek, give and engage with feedback (Carless, 2007; Lam, 2021) and guide students towards more independence within their learning processes.

3. Implementation of Peer Feedback in an Online Test Preparation Course

In this section, we will outline the general characteristics of an online test preparation course for a group of students that is assisted by a tutor. We share our considerations which led to the integration of peer feedback activities during its development. We will illustrate the role of learning activities and feedback methods by using the learning units that focus on the test's integrated writing task as an example. We will conclude this section with an example of peer feedback given in one group of students.

3.1. The Online Preparation Course "Gruppenkurs Training digitaler TestDaF"

The online test preparation course described in this article is offered by Deutsch-Uni Online (DUO). Language learners from all over the world can take part in this "Gruppenkurs Training digitaler TestDaF" (Group course Training for the digital TestDaF) six weeks prior to the official exam (cf. <http://tinyurl.com/TestDaF-Gruppenkurs>). To take part in the course, participants must already have a good level of language proficiency in German, usually corresponding to the B2 or C1 levels of the CEFR. Nevertheless, the groups tend to be very heterogeneous not only in terms of their language proficiency, but also in terms of previous test and study experiences, their country of origin and previous experience with and knowledge of Germany. The course is provided via the interactive DUO learning platform. The DUO learning platform offers text, video and audio contents, a broad variety of exercise types and tools for communication and cooperation such as a discussion forum, a class chat and a co-writing tool that enable learners to exchange information in multimodal ways and actively engage with it. The platform allows multiple forms of feedback such as automated evaluation whether an answer is right or wrong, sample solutions when multiple answers are possible or individual feedback from an experienced teacher (called "tutor") for writing and speaking tasks.

The concept of the course "Gruppenkurs Training digitaler TestDaF" was developed based on a completely self-directed online training course. The self-directed course "Training digitaler TestDaF ohne Tutor" (*Training for the digital TestDaF without a tutor*) has a workload of 35 hours and is divided into five chapters, one on each test section, and a chapter that contains a test simulation allowing learners to complete all 23 tasks and experience the test with its digital interface and timing. It does not include any tasks for interaction with other participants and offers automated feedback only (right/wrong evaluation and sample solutions). Learners are completely flexible in terms of time, intensity and place of their learning, but they do not get individual feedback on their writing and speaking performance.

As opposed to the initial self-directed course without a tutor, the group course is offered with the support of a tutor. The contents and activities of this 60 hours course are organized in six chapters. An introductory chapter has been added to provide learners with information about the digital TestDaF. The activities in this chapter encourage learners to consider their preparation for the TestDaF as a preparation for living and studying in Germany in general. Each of the four chapters covering the four test sections has been enhanced with interactive tasks in the forum to promote interaction among learners in the group course. In the writing and speaking chapters, we have included a unit that focuses on the criteria used to evaluate performance in each test task. An additional peer feedback activity has been integrated in these units to increase engagement with the task and its criteria.

When designing the course, we had to decide which and how many interactive activities, including individual feedback, should be offered. Therefore, we conducted a small study in 2020 with 72 participants to analyze the perceived effect of different methods of feedback on writing and speaking performances. Participants were divided in groups of 18. Each group spent four weeks working through the 35-hours self-directed course, but the individual groups received different types of feedback for their responses given in

the practice test tasks of the writing and speaking sections. The feedback methods compared were: (1) automated non-individual feedback in the form of keywords and phrases for possible answers, (2) same as group 1 + individual feedback from a tutor, (3) only individual feedback from peers, (4) only individual feedback from a tutor.

After the course, the students were asked to take part in an online survey on their learning experience in general, how satisfied they were with the received feedback and how well they felt prepared for the test after the course. Students in group 2 and 4 felt better prepared for the test than the other groups. Those students that were offered automated feedback only (group 1) expressed that they found it helpful, but were insecure about how well they had performed and would therefore have preferred individual feedback. Students in group 3 emphasized that the criteria checklists they had received for giving feedback on other students' performances were very helpful for understanding the task and that they would have liked to have had them available already during their own task solution process. One person expressed that it would have been even better if the tutor could give their opinion after the peers' feedback and suggested including (video) chat sessions for the group. These findings correspond to the criteria of effective feedback mentioned above.

When designing the group course with a tutor, we considered various factors, including the need for individual feedback, the costs associated with offering individual feedback by experienced teachers and the responses by the 2020 study participants. We have taken into account their desire for an increased group interaction and the beneficial impact of peer feedback on learners' understanding of tasks and their engagement with evaluation criteria while they perform the role of a rater, utilize the criteria checklist, and examine other students' writing samples. To maintain flexibility, most of the activities in the group course can still be completed individually on DUO's digital platform. However, peer feedback activities, participation in forum discussions and virtual classroom meetings moderated by the tutor require coordination. To that end, the tutor provides a learning plan with a proposal for time management for students to work through all activities. This learning plan also sets deadlines for the completion of tasks in order to ensure timely feedback. The forms of feedback of the self-directed course without a tutor (automated only) were enhanced with individual feedback by the tutor and anonymous peer feedback. How students obtain individual feedback on their writing and speaking performances by tutors and peers will be discussed below.

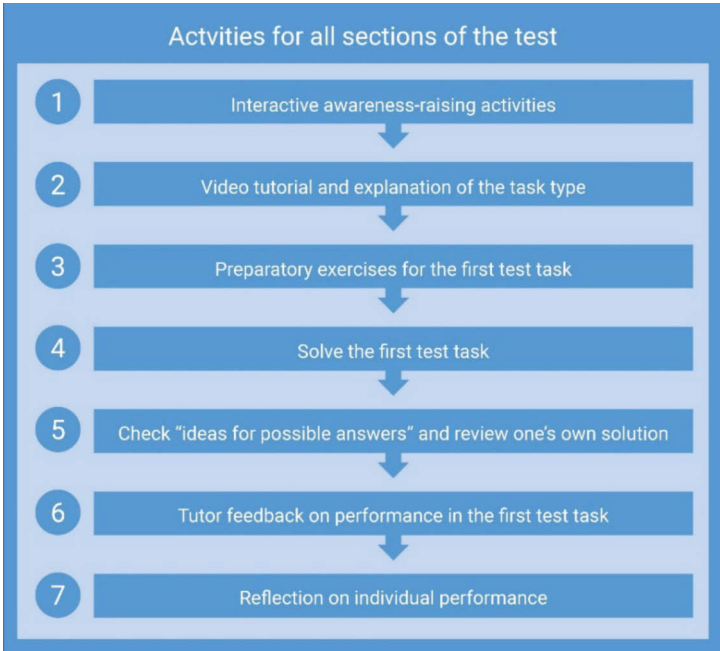
3.2. Peer Feedback Activities within the Learning Activities on a Writing Task of the Test

In this section, we will first introduce the structure of the learning units that are part of all four chapters on test sections and then explain the activities that have been added to the chapters on the writing and speaking tasks of the test, where human raters evaluate test takers' performances.

3.2.1. Learning Activities for All Sections of the Test

The following figure (Figure 1) gives an overview of the learning activities and different feedback methods that are part of all four chapters that help students prepare for the test sections.

Figure 1: Activities for All Sections of the Test



Each chapter on a test section starts with an introductory unit with interactive reflection tasks in the forum and the co-writing tool with the aim to raise awareness for real life contexts and existing individual strategies for solving this section's communicative tasks in real life (1). After that, students watch a video tutorial and read specific explanations about the test task type (2). This input is then applied to prepare for a practice test task (3). As a result, students know what they are expected to do and work on their first test task in a simulated test environment (4) and get an automatically generated non-individual feedback (5). In spite of the fact that students prefer to receive perfect sample answers, the course does not provide this kind of written and oral samples. Instead, we give them hints about the structure or potential arguments they might use for their answer in the form of key words and phrases, but not full sentences. We do this because we want to increase students' engagement and self-reflection skills, rather than push them to memorize an example of a supposedly perfect response. Students can review their own text and decide whether they want to integrate some aspects of these "ideas for possible answers". Then they submit the text/audio to receive individual personal feedback from the tutor (6). The unit closes with exercises for reflection on the individual performance in the test task (7). There is no peer feedback until this point. However, getting to know

the task type properly and working through the first test task as well as the tutor's feedback on their performance familiarizes learners with the requirements of the task and prepares the ground for the peer feedback activity that will take place at the end of the second unit on each writing and speaking test task type.

3.2.2. Additional Activities for Writing and Speaking

In the following, we will describe how peer feedback has been integrated into the learning activities for writing and speaking in order to increase students' involvement. We will continue using the example of the integrated writing task. In this task type, test takers have to summarize information from a written text and a graphic with regard to a specific question.¹ Test takers have to understand the information, compare input information from both sources and decide whether the information is relevant with regard to the question. Afterwards, they have to produce a coherent written text, summarizing the relevant information correctly and in their own words.

As shown in Figure 2, the additional activities for speaking and writing focus on deepening the understanding of the rating criteria as well as on giving and receiving peer feedback.

Figure 2: Additional Activities for Speaking and Writing



1 For a demo video on this task type visit <https://tinyurl.com/Summarizing-text-and-graphic>

After having received the tutor's feedback on their performance in the first test task (steps 1–7), students take a closer look at the specific criteria for assessing this specific communicative situation (8). Research on peer feedback often recommends that learners come up with criteria on their own or discuss them among the group before applying them to each other's performances. In this specific context, shortly before the test event and with highly individual time management besides the six group meetings, it is impossible to implement this step. Furthermore, students cannot work with the actual criteria raters use since intensive training is needed to apply them. Hence, we familiarize students with learner-friendly, comprehensible criteria by using activities such as a multiple-choice quiz on the characteristics of a summary or asking them to choose between different examples of adequate or less adequate answers. They are then given automated feedback and explanations, so there is at least some kind of dialogic process in the familiarization with the criteria. The criteria presented in the course were developed in cooperation with testing experts that were involved in the development of the digital TestDaF. For the integrated writing task, the following five criteria are included:

- (1) The learner text includes information from both sources.
- (2) The information provided in the learner text is relevant for answering the question.
- (3) The information from both sources is correctly summarized.
- (4) The information from both sources is paraphrased with one's own words.
- (5) The learner text is comprehensible and includes only few mistakes.

After the engagement with the criteria, students apply them to other students' writing samples that were gathered in the 2020 study (step 9). As the screenshot (Figure 3) demonstrates, the students rate the writing sample with the help of a matrix, where they can decide whether a particular criterion is fully met, rather met, not quite met, or not met at all. There is an additional column where learners can give examples and explain their ratings. In the following learning activity, students are asked to specify what was accomplished well in the writing and provide suggestions for improvement. After completing their analysis of the text, students can compare their evaluation with a sample evaluation of a trained rater. Students then prepare for the second test task (10) and write their summary (11). At this point, "ideas for possible answers" are no longer provided in order to simulate the actual test environment. Instead, students are encouraged to check their text against the criteria before they submit it for peer feedback (12).

Before giving peer feedback for the first time, learners are familiarized with this type of activity. Peer feedback is introduced in the first virtual meeting in order to explain the concept, establish rules and build trust among the participants. The tutor explains how peer feedback works in general and asks the students about their previous experience with it and their opinion about it, i.e. what they find positive about it or if they have any concerns. The students' opinions are discussed, the rules for giving peer feedback are formulated and useful phrases are collected, in particular regarding the respectful formulation of criticism or making constructive suggestions. Only then students proceed to give feedback to others for the first time.

Figure 3: Learning Activity for Applying Assessment Criteria to a Writing Sample of Another Student

Lesen Sie die Zusammenfassung eines anderen Lernenden zur Beispielaufgabe. Ist der Text gelungen? Üben Sie, die Kriterien zur Einschätzung der Textqualität an diesem Beispiel anzuwenden.

Nachdem Sie Ihre Einschätzung eingetragen haben, können Sie im Tipp die Bewertung einer Lehrkraft ansehen.

Wählen Sie aus und schreiben Sie in die Lücke.

▼ Text eines Lernenden zur Beispielaufgabe

Das Smartphone spielt heutzutage eine wichtige Rolle in unserem Leben. Laut einer Umfrage, hat es für viele Menschen eine größere Bedeutung als, zum Beispiel, ihre Kollegen oder die anderen Bekannte. Das haben die Forscher durch den folgenden Experiment bewiesen. Die Teilnehmende haben zuerst ihre Beziehung zu dem Smartphone charakterisiert, indem sie einige Fragen beantwortet haben. Die Fragen betroffen die emotionale Verbindung des Teilnehmenden zu dem Smartphone. Dann müssten die Teilnehmenden die Person aus ihrer Umgebung und die verschiedenen Geräte je nach ihrer Wichtigkeit sortieren. Die Psychologen beurteilen es nicht wie eine Abhängigkeit, sondern als ein wichtiges soziales Phänomen. Das Smartphone kann man für verschiedene Zwecke verwenden. Die Grafik stellt dar, welche Funktionen des Smartphones von den Deutschen öfter benutzt sind. Sie zeigt, dass fast alle Menschen das Smartphone für das Telefonieren benutzen. 89% benutzen das Photokamera, 67% verbringen die Zeit in den sozialen Netzwerken. Die anderen Funktionen, wie Wecker, E-Mails und Navigation sind von circa 55% von Teilnehmern benutzt.

	trifft voll zu	trifft eher zu	trifft eher nicht zu	trifft nicht zu	Erläuterung
Der Text enthält Informationen aus beiden Quellen.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Die im Text genannten Informationen sind für die Beantwortung der Frage relevant.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Die Informationen aus den Quellen sind inhaltlich korrekt zusammengefasst.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Die Informationen aus den Quellen sind mit eigenen Worten wiedergegeben.	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Der Text enthält nur wenige Fehler und ist gut verständlich.	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Hilfe

Tipp

unbearbeitet

Neustart

Speichern

3.3. Example of the Peer Feedback Provided in the Course

In this section, step 13 (Give and receive feedback on a second test task) will be discussed by looking at the feedback students gave to each other in a course in March 2022. The tutor encouraged each student to evaluate and give further verbal feedback to at least two texts so that students had the chance to reflect on multiple ways of solving a task and to develop more than one perspective on each performance. All ratings and comments were given anonymously.

In Figure 4 we can see that the text has been evaluated by three peers who differed in their evaluation of the text to some extent. In particular, the peer-evaluators did not agree on criterion 2, which was about the relevance of the information from both sources provided in the learner text. The course participants also answered the two open questions regarding strengths and weaknesses. One participant emphasized that the text was easy to understand, while two participants criticized that some relevant information was missing and other irrelevant information was mentioned. These disagreements were discussed in the group meeting following the activity and a professional opinion was given by the teacher in order to clear uncertainties (14).

Figure 4: Example from the Peer Feedback Given to a Writing Sample of a Course Participant. Each “x” Stands for One Student’s Rating.

Text 1

Die Ozeane sind zunehmend durch große Mengen an Plastik bedroht, das zu den schwer abbaubaren Materialien gehört. Plastik ist schädlich für die Umwelt, die Gesundheit der Tiere und auch für uns, indem es zum Beispiel von Fischen oder Plankton gefressen wird und so unfreiwillig Teil unserer Nahrung wird. Aber Plastik ist nicht der einzige Abfall im Meer, 22 % sind Zigaretten, 9 % sind Flaschen, 14 % sind Lebensmittelverpackungen usw. Maßnahmen gegen diese Art der Verschmutzung müssen nicht nur von Regierungen oder privaten Organisationen ausgehen, sondern sollten bereits bei uns und den Produkten, die wir kaufen, den Dingen, die wir wegwerfen, und unserer Art, sie zu entsorgen, beginnen.

Wie gut sind die folgenden Kriterien umgesetzt?
Schreibt „x“ in Spalte, die eurer Einschätzung entspricht.

	Kriterium	trifft voll zu	trifft eher zu	trifft eher nicht zu	trifft nicht zu	ggf. Begründung/Erklärung
1.	Der Text enthält Informationen aus beiden Quellen.	xxX				
2.	Die im Text genannten Informationen sind für die Beantwortung der Frage relevant.	x	x	x		
3.	Die Informationen aus den Quellen sind inhaltlich korrekt zusammengefasst.	xxx				
4.	Die Informationen aus den Quellen sind mit eigenen Worten wiedergegeben.		xxx			
5.	Der Text enthält nur wenige Fehler und ist gut verständlich.	xx	x			

Was hat euch gut gefallen?
Schreibt eure Bemerkungen jeweils in eine neue Zeile.
Der Beitrag ist einfach und verständlich.

Was sollte noch verbessert werden? Macht möglichst konkrete Vorschläge!
Schreibt eure Bemerkungen jeweils in eine neue Zeile.
Das Thema behandelt nicht allgemeines Plastik, sondern "Mikroplastik". Außerdem gibt es keine Informationen über die kosmetische Produkte sowie Putz- und Reinigungsmittel.
Du hast Ablenkung von dem Thema "Mikroplastik und die Auswirkung auf Menschen".

4. Students’ and Tutor’s Perceptions of Peer Feedback

At the end of the course, we asked students to comment on their perception of the peer feedback by filling in an online survey.² When responding to the question about what they did (not) like about giving feedback on other learners’ answers, several persons emphasized the positive effects of taking the perspective of a rater, since it helped them “a lot to understand what was expected” of them and “what the exact purpose of the tasks was”. Furthermore, engaging with feedback helped the course participants to “better recognize [their] own mistakes and to improve faster by experiencing the evaluators’ experience and coming into contact with solutions from learners who are more or less at the same level [as me].” Some altruistic aspects of helping another person to improve were listed among the positive comments. On the negative side, the students mentioned that it took them a considerable amount of time to give feedback and that “sometimes it was hard to be objective and correct mistakes properly.”

2 All answers were given in German and have been translated by the authors of the chapter.

The tutor's impressions after almost two years of teaching this course confirmed the learners' statements. According to the tutor, through the process of peer feedback, participants engaged more intensively with the requirements of each task type and became thus quite aware of what exactly is expected of them. The opportunity to hear and read other learners' written and oral answers seems to be another benefit of the peer feedback activities. By comparing their own answers with those of other course participants, they seemed to be able to better assess their own performance. In addition, the texts might have given them additional ideas on possible answers and how to present their arguments. These impressions resonate with findings in former studies on the benefits of giving peer feedback (cf. e.g. Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). According to the tutor's impression, by seeing other students' answers that are difficult to understand, learners are also encouraged to critically question the intelligibility and comprehensibility of their own answers.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we reported on how we had implemented peer feedback within a six-week online group course in preparation for a high-stakes exam. The reasons for implementing peer feedback as described above were partly the desire to offer as much individual feedback as possible while keeping the participation fee affordable, but even more so the positive effects of active engagement with the criteria that we had observed when students assessed their peers' texts. With the group course design described in this article, students are offered structured, personalized and individualized feedback quickly and regularly. The feedback is also based on transparent assessment criteria, and students are actively involved in the process. Still, not all suggestions for peer feedback mentioned in the literature could be met in this short term and highly flexible online course context with participants from all over the world.

The online material of this course can also be used for courses at institutions with local students and teachers, where more time might be available and where the setting allows for more teacher-led in-class or digital meetings of the whole group. For these contexts, the design could be improved by dedicating more time to trust-building activities or the co-construction of assessment criteria and, most importantly, by encouraging further discussion about whether the received feedback was understood, by applying suggested improvements and by seeking further dialogue about the texts with peers and/or teachers.

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