

Helping Students to Improve the Standard of Their Writing with Generative AI: An Evaluation of a Studiosity+ Pilot

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Abstract

The University of Sunderland has been partnering with Studiosity for the past three years to provide an additional student support service which helps students to improve the quality of their academic writing. Studiosity's 'Writing Feedback' service offers students the opportunity to submit draft pieces of writing for feedback on their grammar, level of writing, referencing, etc., with the feedback being provided by academic staff recruited from leading institutions throughout the world on a 24/7/365 basis, in under 24 hours. In response to the mainstream adoption of generative artificial intelligence software solutions, Studiosity have developed their 'Writing Feedback+' service where students' work can now be evaluated by AI in near real time. Sunderland were offered a pro bono trial of this service for up to six months for evaluation purposes, which we used with a discrete cohort of approximately 4,000 students. This was deployed between May and August 2024 on our distance learning platform, and this paper will examine the trial in more detail and explore some of the data on student use which we now have, along with the results of a feedback survey which was conducted after the trial which yielded generally positive results.

Keywords: AI, Feedback, Studiosity, Trial, Writing

Introduction and Background

Studiosity is an Australian EdTech company founded in 2003 to provide a student support service which helps students with the quality of their academic writing, looking at things such as grammar, referencing, level appropriateness of writing, etc. (Studiosity, 2025a). By recruiting academics from English-speaking centres throughout the world, including Australia, Canada, and the UK, they are able to provide feedback to students on a 24/7/365 basis, within 24 hours. The University of Sunderland entered into a partnership with Studiosity in 2021 (Studiosity, 2025b). We provide targeted access to Studiosity for new students entering at Level 4 or on Integrated Foundation Degrees only, and have had good success with an early intervention activity designed to give students early exposure to Studiosity as a diagnostic tool which can help them with their writing at the crucial juncture of transition from school / college to university (McChristie, 2025).

Writing Feedback+ Trial

In response to the mainstream adoption of generative artificial intelligence services since the release of ChatGPT in November 2022 (Hu, 2023), Studiosity have developed an AI-powered version of their core

service. 'Writing Feedback+' provides the same type of feedback as their classic 'Writing Feedback' service, but in near real-time (Studiosity, 2024). As a measure of our successful partnership, Sunderland were offered a pro bono trial of the new service for evaluation purposes, for up to 6 months and with up to 5,000 students.

One stipulation from Studiosity was that the cohort would need to be discrete, completely separate from our ongoing classic provision. This was to provide them with clean data for evaluation, and was beneficial from our perspective as it afforded us the opportunity to provide clear, targeted marketing. For maximum impact we chose to deploy the pilot to our Sunderland Online students, who are enrolled onto a wholly separate instance of our VLE, Canvas, for students studying on our online only programmes (Sunderland Online, 2025). These programmes are almost exclusively post-graduate level, and the students, as they are studying on a fully online / distance learning mode, do not have access to our standard library and student support services, making them an ideal cohort for the trial.

Writing Feedback+ was enabled and made available in May 2024 for the remainder of the academic year, a period that covered a new student intake and their first formative assignment submission. Approximately 4,000 students were enrolled and had access to Writing Feedback+ throughout this period of time. The service was marketed as a research pilot to manage expectations related to ongoing provision, and with the support of the Academic Head of Sunderland Online and course tutors.

The Writing Feedback+ service looks and works much like many online assessment systems, such as the Canvas Assignment tool or Turnitin. Students receive their feedback in much the same manner also, with their submission shown on the left part of the screen, with areas needing attention highlighted, and a panel on the right providing detail. This can range from individual words with spelling errors, to paragraphs of text written in an inappropriate style for the level of study in question, with suggestions on how to address this. The key difference, and benefit, of Writing Feedback+ as compared to the classic service, is that students no longer have to wait up to 24 hours to receive feedback from a human agent at Studiosity. Highlights and feedback appear on the student submission in a matter of minutes.

Studiosity have a philosophy of providing "help not answers" (Studiosity, 2025c). What this means in practice is that students are not provided with corrected or altered versions of their work, but with help, support and guidance on how to make improvements to their work themselves. This makes the Writing Feedback+ service an arguably more helpful, useful and *ethical* AI service which institutions could provide to students to prevent more illicit uses of other AI services. As has always been the case with Studiosity, the service also helps academic staff by reducing their workload during marking. With Writing Feedback,

whether classic of AI powered, providing feedback on the quality of the writing, academics are freed to spend more time focusing on the academic content of the work in question.

Usage and Survey Analysis

At the end of the pilot, usage data was extracted from Canvas which showed that Writing Feedback+ was used 1,490 times. A student survey asking about their experience was made available for a two-week period and received 75 responses. Breaking down usage by student reveals that 358 individuals used the service, which averages out at 4.16 interactions per student. While 117 students used the service only once, 31 students used it over 10 times, resulting in a mean usage of 2 interactions per student. At the end of each interaction students were asked to rate their experience with the service on a standard 5-point Likert scale. During the trial 217 students provided this rating, a response rate of 14.56%. 88% of those students reported being either Extremely or Somewhat Satisfied with the service.

	No. Responses	% of Total
Extremely Satisfied	125	57.6
Somewhat Satisfied	66	30.41
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	18	8.29
Somewhat Dissatisfied	3	1.38
Extremely Dissatisfied	5	2.3

Table 1: Student Satisfaction Ratings

Students also have the option of leaving free-text comments. Thirty-three students left comments, most of which were positive in tone. A particularly positive comment follows, chosen because it highlights a number of aspects of Writing Feedback+:

“Absolutely amazing! [...] As a student with very bad dyslexia this is such an asset to allow me to check my work and also reach my full potential. [...] It is like having my own tutor with me 24 hours a day.”

Anonymous Student 1

In one negative comment, a student identifies the issue of replacing the work of real people with AI:

“Using AI instead of individual human[s] ... is a massive step-backwards and removes any faith in being given advice which can help me to improve and correct mistakes.”

At the conclusion of the trial, we asked students for their views via a short survey. This was created in Qualtrics, and, on ethical grounds the survey was designed to be completely anonymous. No questions were asked pertaining to name, student ID, etc., and no technology was used to ‘track’ responses or link responses to individual students. This was one reason why Qualtrics was chosen over the internal Canvas Quiz / Survey tool. This information, or disclaimer, along with our goals and intentions, were clearly stated in a Canvas announcement which contained a link to the survey and invited students to complete it if they wished. The survey was open for two weeks in September 2024, and we received responses from 75 students, of which 56 said they had used the Writing Feedback+ service. On the question of satisfaction we received 50 responses, with 94% reporting that they were Extremely or Somewhat Satisfied with the service.

	No. Responses	% of Total
Extremely Satisfied	31	62
Somewhat Satisfied	16	32
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	2	4
Somewhat Dissatisfied	0	0
Extremely Dissatisfied	1	2

Table 2: Student Satisfaction Ratings, From Post-Trial Survey

Of responding students, 75% reported that they found the service helpful with their studies, 96% would recommend it to other students, and 98% would use the service again if the opportunity was available.

The final question was a free-text invitation for comments to gather qualitative feedback. Thirty-six students provided answers to this question, and a basic thematic analysis revealed that the largest grouping of comments was around the theme of ‘grammar’. While 5 of the comments which mentioned grammar were positive in tone, one of the negative comments and two of the neutral comments expressed the opinion that the service over-focused on grammar. Overall, 30 of the responses were positive in nature, 2 were negative, while 4 were neutral. Speculatively, this is perhaps indicative of a strength of generative AI, where rules-based elements of language are easier to process, unlike elements which require some level of value judgement, such as level appropriateness.

Conclusion and Future Work

Sunderland's partnership with Studiosity was instigated as part of a range of measures to improve our student retention and attainment rates, and after three years we have strong and consistent evidence of a correlation between student engagement with Studiosity and improvements on these measures (McChristie, 2025). A meta-analysis which examined data from multiple HE institutions also found improved rates of retention (Nous, 2022). At the time of writing, we do not yet have the data to show whether or not the correlation between use of Studiosity and improved grades and progression rates was present in this cohort, but this will be the focus of future work. However, the strong positive feedback we received from the students is an encouraging indicator.

References

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