

OBSERVATIONS THAT GUIDE PRACTICE!

Creating Effective Student Online Feedback— It Must Engage and Motivate, Not Merely Sit

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The research available for student feedback is scarce, yet if updated stats existed they no doubt would merely re-enforce, not contradict, these: “39 percent of the students indicated they spent 5 minutes or less reading the feedback ... 81% spent 15 minutes or less reading feedback” (Faculty Focus, 2014). Indeed, anyone who teaches online has run into the conundrum of giving detailed, comprehensive feedback to students, yet seeing the same errors repeated again and again. Clearly, students are not using or not reading the feedback. Yet there are approaches—proven approaches—that can be employed to turn this disappointing observation into one where students embrace instructor feedback, showing the results in assignment after assignment.

One important note: there is a downside to each of the tips that follow—each does take more time, both on the part of the instructor and student. For us the extra time is part of why we signed up to teach: to do whatever it takes to help our students improve. And we do

get three pluses: better student use of feedback results in less time going over future assignments, more prepared and successful students, and fewer “I don’t get it!” questions. For the students it is important to let them know not only will incorporating the feedback result in better class performance but they will also be better prepared for their roles in the professional world. So, for both student and instructor ... the big picture says, “Yup—it’s definitely worth that extra time!”

Use one, some, or all of these suggestions for a nice improvement.

Be Proactive: Explain Feedback Before Giving It

The *Harvard Business Review* (2019) states, “instruction [about feedback]—telling people what steps to follow or what factual knowledge they’re lacking—can be truly useful.” Letting students know upfront the basics of feedback—explaining it, how it can

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improve knowledge of a subject, how best to use it, et cetera—can go a long way in students spending more time on the feedback and having less confusion about feedback comments. A nice bonus to this: fewer questions to the instructor. This should be sent to the class as an email attachment, posted (if possible) in the class for ongoing viewing, and attached to each assignment returned.

Always Connect Assignment Comments to the “Real World”

Many students go into a course with only two goals: to receive as high a grade as possible and for the course to end! Thus, their thinking of feedback nearly always remains for course assignments and learning the course material for the assignments. When students understand the connection of feedback to their jobs and careers they often take a harder look at instructor input. Remind students to consider how any feedback will help in their professional lives. Include at least one or two comments in feedback connecting the feedback to the student’s major/professional goal, as well as a pre-written paragraph that tags along with feedback generically reminding student of feedback’s professional importance.

Be Sure to Address Students by Their Names

Per the website teachersarethebest.com (2022), “when you recognize your students’ names it makes a difference in how they see you as their teacher. Your dedication to inclusivity in the classroom is strengthened by knowing your students’ names.” Begin feedback with an overall brief explanatory paragraph (relating to the assignment) with the student’s name. Within the feedback include the student’s name: this shows the feedback was specific to that student, rather than for any student.

Employing a Bank of Comments Is Fine ... But Do Personalize Them

Using a bank of feedback comments—comments prewritten from which this or that can be drawn for the student saves time for the instructor. But when a student sees the same comments in a myriad of assignments they can begin to be overlooked. Personalize some of the comments so the student knows the observation has been focused on that student. Include links to school resources—another great way to improve student use of feedback. Be careful not to make bank comments too long, inordinately complex, or difficult to understand.

Use Feedback That Is a Triptych

Leibold and Schwarz (n.d.) offer, “Clear feedback that communicates specific information to the learner is another best practice for giving effective online feedback.” A triptych approach is thorough: (1) Indicating what is incorrect; (2) Explaining why it is incorrect; (3) Detailing how to get it correct. End some of the comments with a question, such as, “How do you think this proofreading error would be perceived by the reader?” or “What efforts can you make to be sure this error does not again occur?” Remember: not all errors or inconsistencies in an assignment will necessitate the triptych approach—too much use of triptych feedback can result in an overabundance of feedback—never good. With certain exceptions—such as a proofreading error—give detailed feedback only once; for future occurrences one can write, for example, “See comment #3.”

Always Include at Least One or Two Positive Comments About the Feedback—And Start With a Nice Motivator

Students reading feedback that only says, in essence, “This is wrong,” “You made an incorrect value here,” “Your thinking is all off,” and

“You need to re-read the directions” can quickly become discouraging. Students must know there are positives in any assignment—this lets the student know positive efforts are noted; this also serves as valuable motivation. No matter how poorly written or structured an assignment might be always look for at least two positives to mention. In the opening feedback intro paragraph give (one or more) praise for effort, (perhaps) going in the right direction, knowing the importance of improving, not making a previous assignment error (if applicable), et cetera.

Have at Least One Personal Connection Comment

The award-winning teaching website Teachermade (2022) reminds that “Students can see through it when you’re not genuine. Build better relationships with genuine feedback. You will be amazed by the line of communication you can open up with being authentic, respectful, and constructive with your student feedback.” A genuine piece of feedback can include a personal comment that tells the student everyone makes such an error, such as, “Hey—when I was an undergrad the thesis was so confusing to me I was given an extra assignment to get it right!” It’s always helpful to connect a piece of a student assignment to the instructor’s career, such as, “I so clearly remember that equation: it was crucial in a new food additive I was developing for my company.” Such a comment can also end with a question to the student, such as, “Now, how about you—can you give me a some feedback on how this equation might be helpful in your career?”

Use Badges When Giving Feedback

David Niguidula (2021), worldwide educational technology consultant, says, “To better represent student achievement, schools are creating digital badges. When students earn a badge, it means that they have achieved a mile-

stone. Most students are familiar with the concept of earning badges from activities outside of school, from scouting to video games to martial arts.” The use of online badges gives an immediate visual bonus to feedback: students see the instructor’s attention to individual feedback, it can give a message of achievement, a badge can motivate, and it is an essay and quick summation of a longer comment. Another cool thing: have students send the instructor a badge that represents their overall feeling about the feedback they received. There are several websites that offer free online badges

Have Students Give Feedback

Asking students to give feedback to the instructor on the feedback received assures a closer look at the feedback by the student; it also helps the instructor perhaps the feedback given to the student. Also, have the students pick one or items of feedback, then send an email to the instructor on why it would prove helpful. If a particular piece of student feedback stands out send an email to the student with a nice thanks—and explain why.

Create a Feedback Edit Sheet

The feedback edit sheet is, without question, the most valuable tool I use in having students embrace assignment feedback. Created by me, I remind students to use this for every assignment. It has definitely resulted in more use of feedback and higher student grades. Have students jot down the errors indicated by their instructor on this feedback edit sheet, then for future assignments use it as a reminder of what errors were made to be sure they do not reoccur.

Remember: Making errors in our life is a bonus to our improvement, for once we understand why the mistakes occurred we have a blueprint to be sure they do not reappear.

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