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Feedback in Online Courses: An Essential Instructional Practice

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Abstract

As institutions of higher education turn more to online and remote learning, the ability of faculty to provide actionable feedback to students remains a critical responsibility of effective instructors. Based on a review of research on the significance of feedback to student learning and a review of online courses over the past several semesters, it was determined that there are significant differences in the timeliness, methods, frequency, and quality of feedback given to students. The variability noted can alter the impact on student learning. Based on their experience as online instructors the writers suggest best practices for providing feedback that have proven successful in practice.

Introduction

As institutions of higher education are focusing more on online instruction, the ability of faculty to provide actionable feedback to students remains a critical element of effective pedagogy.

Feedback has been described by Cohen (1985) as being “one of the more instructionally powerful and least understood features of instructional design” (p. 33). Feedback has also been identified as a critical factor in student learning (Hattie and Timberly, 2007). This still remains true as online education is growing as a significant approach to teaching and learning in higher education (Seaman, J., Allen, I.E., & Seaman, J., 2018). Consequently, a central question for educators is how to provide students with meaningful and timely feedback in online courses.

Early studies of feedback in distance education courses suggested that instructor feedback is more essential in these settings than it is in traditional classroom settings ([Mason & Bruning, 2001](#)). [Burns \(2013\)](#) suggests that student satisfaction in online courses may be directly linked to the level of support received from their instructor. More recently this is supported in a study by McCarthy (2017) that suggests students value feedback from the “experts” in the course.

The Online Learning Consortium outlines Five Pillars of Quality Online Education (Online Learning Consortium, 2017). The Student Satisfaction Pillar indicates that student satisfaction can be improved through constructive, timely, and substantive interaction between faculty and students. Providing effective feedback is one way of addressing this.

Written feedback continues to be the most commonly used response to student work in online courses. Yet, the methods available to provide feedback continue to advance, thus encouraging instructors to make use of new technologies that provide opportunities for audio and video comments. Studies comparing student satisfaction of written and audio feedback in online courses found that students perceived audio feedback to be easier to understand, more

constructive, and because of the ability to hear the instructor's intonations, more personal ([Lunt & Curran, 2010](#), [Bourgault, Mundy, & Joshua, 2013](#), [Wood, Moskovitz, & Valiga, 2011](#)). For example, in a study of students in a graduate nursing program, faculty used audio feedback on written assignments in one of their practice-based courses. At the end of the course, 63% (n=30) of the students responded to a survey about the feedback provided. The respondents believed that in comparison to courses that used written feedback, audio feedback allowed them to understand the instructor comments more clearly (70%), made them feel more involved in the course (67%) and made the course more personal (80%). They also felt that the feedback was more motivating (60%), and that they retained more content (50%). One student reported that the instructor's audio comments were difficult to follow while simultaneously trying to reread the paper and students who self-identified as visual learners preferred written comments. Thirty percent of students who responded to the survey believed that they did not retain information as well as they would have if the feedback had been written ([Wood et al., 2011](#)). Newer technologies and improvements in tools that are linked through Learning Management Systems (LMS) may have addressed some of student these concerns.

Today most LMSs have built in voice and video recording capabilities and often also provide easy access to Kaltura, Screencast-O-Matic and YUJA among others. These tools facilitate the application of feedback beyond the written word. Instructors can use these tools to provide brief lectures, guidance regarding the assigned tasks, and more significantly, feedback related to student work.

Two Lenses for Feedback

Effective and meaningful feedback in online courses should be examined through two lenses: feedback to an individual student and feedback to the whole group.

Feedback directed privately to an individual student

When addressing an individual student, effective feedback is focused on the specifics of that student's response to the assignment. Feedback of this type is individualized and addresses strengths and weaknesses in the student's own work. Additionally, feedback should be formative as the purpose is to encourage the student to seek a deeper understanding of content or to personally connect to the material in a more meaningful way. Feedback provided with a positive tone can help strengthen the student-instructor connection.

Feedback Directed to the Group or Whole Class

The discussion board, the weekly announcements, and/or written notes are the most common methods of providing feedback to the entire group. This public feedback has implications for knowledge development of the entire class. Similarly, feedback can be directed to specific groups of students. Particularly in asynchronous learning environments, where the discussion board is used as the primary communication platform, feedback must also seek to make interpersonal interaction richer while encouraging communication that is meaningful and

supportive of deeper learning.

Consistent Practice

Effective pedagogy recognizes feedback as a vital tool in the development of student knowledge and their understanding of subject matter (Hattie & Timberley, 2007). A review of online courses over the past several semesters indicated that there are significant differences in the timeliness, methods, frequency, and quality of feedback given to students. The variability noted can alter the impact feedback can have on student learning.

The following are some of the common issues identified through the review of courses:

Issue	Result
Instructor comments are not explicit and do not give direction for further learning or exploration by the student	Critical thinking skills are not developed
Instructor comments in an asynchronous learning environment are missing or do not encourage interactive discourse	Sharing of ideas or collaborative knowledge development is inadequate
Feedback is not offered in a timely manner	Students cannot use the information in future assignments
Grades are assigned that are not based on a known rubric	Students cannot fully determine the basis for the grade
Over reliance on rubrics to reduce subjectivity	Feedback may be more objective; however, it often lacks specificity to provide adequate formative guidance
Grades are assigned without explanatory notes	Assessment is of little instructional value because grades alone are not constructively corrective

The following practical suggestions are based on observation, research and

experience: **Understanding the Rationale: Making Feedback More Constructive**

While feedback does not need to be provided uniformly in a prescribed manner, effective feedback should be timely, frequent, and serve one or more of the following purposes:

- *Feedback is formative and actionable* (Wiggins, 2012). Comments such as “good work,” “in need of improvement,” or, “Where are you going with this comment?” do not inform the student’s understanding. To be meaningful instructional feedback must indicate why the answer is not complete, accurate, or responsive to the question asked. It should also supply information to improve the student’s understanding of the material. A more informative instructor comment would be to ask the student to explicitly address the question and/or provide specific evidence to support their ideas.
- *Feedback encourages greater interaction and further discussion during asynchronous activities* (Online Learning Consortium, 2017). In an online course, it is important to facilitate group interaction, collaborative knowledge development, and a sense of community. Instructor comments should promote critical, probing, and reflective responses to the student’s own work and to the work of their peers. The instructor should remain active throughout the process to provide additional guidance as needed.
- *Feedback encourages critical thinking* (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011). Comments that are not explicit and do not give direction for further learning or exploration cannot assist the student in developing critical thinking skills. Instructors can ask probing and directive questions designed to require further exploration of the topic. Requiring students to support their ideas by relating them to the theories of the discipline could help accomplish this.
- *Feedback is timely* (Watson, Bishop, & Ferdinand-James, 2017). Timeliness is not only courteous, it also contributes to student learning. Courses are typically designed to allow for the developmental scaffolding of knowledge where assignments, readings, lectures, notes, and class discourse build upon each other and help the student to construct knowledge in a sequential way. Timely feedback allows the student to use the instructor’s comments` constructively when moving forward in the course.
- *Feedback can be provided in a variety of modalities*. The variety of multimedia tools embedded in Learning Management Systems and the availability of web-based applications that allow for audio, video, screen recordings, self-paced quizzes, and polling allows instructors to vary the way feedback is offered. Audio and audio/visual feedback appear to have the potential to improve student to instructor connections, thereby improving the online learning experience. Audio and video feedback also aligns with principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018).
- *Feedback provides guidance to become better writers*. Writing skills, even for graduate students often need improvement. Inadequate writing skills can negatively impact results on certification tests, on the ability to get a job, and even on job performance evaluations. The instructor is obliged to help the student achieve greater facility with Standard English usage, grammar, and spelling. One common issue is that students do not always organize ideas in a logical and sequential manner, which makes it difficult for the reader to understand the intended meaning. Effective feedback includes helping students acquire the

skills that are necessary to produce written work that is both responsive to the assigned task and expressed in a coherent and fluent manner.

- *Feedback promotes the recognition of intellectual property and academic integrity.* Students need to learn to recognize and appropriately acknowledge the ideas and works of others. Using the correct format for citations and references is also an element of scholarship. For students to develop these skills independently, instructors may direct them to self-help websites such as [Perdue Owl Online Writing Lab](#) which offers guidance with general and subject-specific writing, and resources for research and development of citations.
- *Feedback should be genuine, supportive and specific* (Al-Bashir, Kabir, & Raman, 2016; Wiggins, 2012). When critiquing work, effective feedback is thoughtful and uses positive language that serves to motivate students to work toward specific goals.

The above offers a frame of reference for determining the purpose and methods for providing feedback to students participating in online asynchronous activities.

Concluding Thoughts

As education becomes increasingly dependent on technology it is of great consequence to maintain the basic elements of human interaction that exist in a traditional classroom. To achieve this connection instructors must be willing to recognize that teaching in an online environment is not analogous to supervising an independent study. Online instruction still requires active teaching. Online learners will not benefit unless they receive consistent and timely feedback. Feedback works best as an act of direct teaching and it is incumbent on the instructor to clarify misunderstandings related to the subject matter. Feedback can be provided in a variety of modalities that best meet the context. It should be directive when needed, and supportive of continued exploration by students to improve their understanding of the concepts addressed.

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