

Effective Feedback Strategies for the Online Classroom

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Feedback is more than post-assignment commentary. When employed correctly, feedback can impact students on a variety of levels. It helps direct what they should do with their time, how they should feel about their efforts, whether their motivation level is appropriate, whether they are meeting expectations, and more.

Because feedback serves so many purposes in the online classroom, it is important for instructors to consider how feedback is provided, when it is offered, how it is focused or targeted, and what is considered in the feedback.

Best practices consider feedback holistically and address three key elements: timing, target, and nature. It is important for instructors to be deliberate about all three factors and use care when determining when to deliver feedback, what the feedback should say, and what the feedback is meant to accomplish.

First, feedback must be timely if it is to be effective. This means it is consistent, immediate, ongoing, incremental, and formative. Feedback must also be targeted. It should be communicated directly to the learner and specific to the task at hand. Feedback should address effort and whether the student appropriately processed the task. Targeted feedback, however, does not have to be direct communication between the instructor and one student. It can be peer-based, individual, or group.

Finally, instructors need to consider the nature of their feedback. It should be corrective and specifically identify where, if at all, students veered off course. It should be concrete and specific so students understand which portion of the task they completed incorrectly or which course material they failed to understand. Feedback should reference assignment criteria so that it appears founded and appropriate. It should be useful and actionable; instructors should give suggestions on how to redress problems and make improvements in the next assignments. It isn't enough to tell students that they did something wrong; instructors need to explain how to do it better the next time. Tone is also very important, particularly without in-person rapport to modulate criticism. To this point, instructors need to take care to compliment what students do well and to sandwich criticism in more positive feedback.

When delivered effectively, feedback is a tool that develops cognitive understanding, motivation and engagement, and interpersonal connections. It not only helps students learn course material but also helps keep them motivated, engaged in what can feel like an isolated environment, and connected to the course. Feedback can foster interpersonal connections between instructors and students. It can even foster connections among students. All told, feedback has a direct bearing on whether students have meaningful interactions with course materials and overall positive course experiences. Because feedback can be such a powerful tool, it behooves instructors to endeavor to get the most impact from the feedback they provide.

The Challenge of Online Teaching

As is the case with many aspects of instruction, the issue with feedback is not that instructors don't know what they should be doing. Rather, it is that instructors don't have the time to provide the kind of feedback they would like to deliver. With one teacher and 10, 15, 20, or even 50 students per course (and often multiple courses taught per term), it

can be daunting and even impossible to fulfill feedback best practices. In any given week, instructors face an exponential buildup of student artifacts that demand time and attention. It is an overwhelming challenge to maintain a desirable level and quality of feedback without overinvesting, which can lead to instructor burnout.

It is important to note that the goal is not to improve feedback by spending more time on it. Rather, the goal is to optimize time spent on feedback so that instructors can invest an appropriate amount of effort and get high-quality results. It's the adage of working smarter, not harder.

There are tools and strategies that will allow instructors to shift the balance and invest their time in a manner and place that yield high-quality feedback that impacts student learning while still leaving time for other high-impact activities. After all, feedback is important, but it isn't the only activity that matters.

Instructional Strategies

Effective and efficient feedback comes down to three broad strategies.

The first is time management. Instructors who struggle with feedback may need to consider how they manage their time. They should look at not only how much time they spend on each course but also whether they are spending the most time on the activities with the highest impact and the least time on the activities with the lowest impact.

The second strategy is to embrace emergent technologies. Technology can automate some repetitive feedback tasks to improve efficiency without diminishing quality.

The third strategy is to adopt a more holistic feedback approach that views feedback as a more organic element of instruction and not something that is delivered only after an assignment is submitted.

Time Management

Providing feedback is just one facet of online instruction. An instructor is responsible for myriad tasks and must meet a variety of obligations. Prioritizing efforts and allocating an appropriate amount of time to all instructional practices is a constant balancing act for most instructors, but there are some principles to guide them.

On a broad level, the role of the instructor can be broken down into three categories of activities: teaching, grading and feedback, and administration.

Teaching

For years adult-learning theory has said that online courses are filled with adult learners and that instructors are there to facilitate adult learners. However, that is a limited view of the role of the online instructor. While the "sage on the stage" model is outdated and ill-suited to online education, instructors are still subject matter experts who are teaching because they have knowledge, both in terms of breadth and mastery that their students do not have.

Instructors are valued, at least in part, for the degrees they have earned and for the scholarship they produce. This expertise and knowledge are valuable not only to institutions but also to students, and both should be tapped for students' benefits. Instructors certainly are facilitators now more than at any other time, but they still have a responsibility to share and bestow information. Classroom activities should utilize this expertise to impact student learning.

Grading and feedback

No one argues that grading and feedback are not important. Research overwhelmingly shows that students pay attention and respond to grades. They guide their time, their attention, and their effort based on the grades they are getting. Thus, grading and feedback can be effective tools for focusing students' attention. For this to work, however, grading must be aligned with learning objectives, and feedback must move students toward those learning objectives. Also imperative is that grading and feedback are consistent and timely. All the pieces must work together to have the most impact.

Administration

Course administration or management is also a necessary component of instruction. Course management might include answering how-to questions, guiding students through the learning management system, or helping troubleshoot technical issues. This is particularly important for online students who will struggle if they cannot navigate course technology. Technology should create learning opportunities, not barriers. Overall, instructors need to keep courses well organized and functional so that small issues or annoyances do not interfere with learning.

Reprinted from the whitepaper *Efficient and Effective Feedback in the Online Classroom*.

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