Why this Teaching Method Matters

Critiquing and grading take time. Often we explain criticisms only to discover that students make the same mistakes again. Students increasingly contest grades too—although that’s often alleviated by giving clear criteria beforehand. Throughout, we have a duty to maintain standards, deciding who should continue in a given profession or focus, and who should direct their talents elsewhere. But we also need to nurture potential and avoid sparking defensiveness in order to encourage growth. What we need are ways to give feedback and grade smarter – not just harder. You might wonder whether providing critiques of student work and giving higher or lower grades will affect your student evaluations. Much research has examined the relationship of grades and ratings (2) and the correlation of the two averages about 0.2. Evaluation researchers suggest that this result indicates that better teaching results in better learning and, subsequently, more student satisfaction (2, see Marsh, 2007, p. 357). More important is how we communicate about grading, and especially how students perceive our fairness, clarity, organization, accessibility, friendliness, and enthusiasm.

Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

Criticism and grades generate high emotions for both faculty and students. It often helps to first remind students that grading can be subjective but that you grade with fairness and learning in mind. Then assume students want to understand their grades. As cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker has observed, “It’s hard to know what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know” (3). Yet that’s exactly what we need to understand. What prior misconceptions do students have for each unit they’re learning, and how will they respond to our feedback on that learning along the way? Did most students give similar ratings on IDEA item 7, or were responses bifurcated? From open-ended comments, is there (dis)satisfaction with your grading, feedback or both? Do comments extend to all class work, or did a single incident or assignment spark a wish for better feedback or more fair grades?

To learn more about student perceptions of your feedback, wait until you comment on or grade the first test or project, and then ask students to write anonymously in class for 5-10 minutes. Ask, “What helped when I explained reasons for criticisms of your performance? What criticisms can I explain even better? What could you do yourself to improve next time?” Summarize replies in class or online, thanking people for what helped you, and explaining what you believe will be appropriate to change.

Consider four major principles. First, the more we clarify our learning objectives and grading criteria, with a scoring guide, trait list, analytic scale, rubric, or matrix (4) in advance, the more students perceive our criticisms as fair (5). Use class time to answer questions about your expectations and have students write “The five most important things I need to focus on to improve my grade are ___. Share in pairs for a minute and then report out. After returning assignments, ask students to explain or paraphrase the feedback to peers or to you. Work on making criteria increasingly objective, linking a score or grade to specific criteria like “Evidence exists for 90% of the above criteria and throughout 90% of the project,” or “No more than 3 to 4 errors (in grammar, passive verbs, sentences with unneeded words; and/or sentence structure) were found in the work.”

Second, before making summative judgments (for decisions such as grades), it always helps to give formative feedback (for improvement, during a process) both to reinforce strengths and to explain where work went wrong and what should be done. To manage your feedback workload, only schedule as many assignments as you can respond to, and focus on quality rather than quantity of feedback. For example, limit your suggestions for improvement to the two or three areas where a student is most likely to make progress. This should ultimately...
result in higher quality work from students.

Whether grading math problems or a historical analysis, save time by having students submit a self-assessment against a checklist of common omissions or the few vital things every assignment must display. For scientific or technical problems, or any other assignment structured around clear right/wrong answers, return student work marked only right or wrong. Before assigning points, have students not only find and correct their errors, but explain where exactly they went wrong. One study showed that the more students actively verify their own math solutions, the better they perform over time (6).

Third, for written work, consider grading some work such as journals, other informal writing, or early drafts of a major assignment with only pass/fail. Shift the emphasis for this kind of work from evaluation to feedback for the student. For early drafts, you might have students provide feedback to each other, after giving them some guidance on providing feedback. (For instance, say, “For first drafts, mark not grammar, punctuation, or written form, but only big-picture issues such as underlying strong thesis statements, noting organizational headings in the margins, and checking that claims are well-supported.”) Reserve your own feedback for later drafts where incentive to improve may be highest, and provide more minimal feedback on final drafts when incentive has decreased. When professors require drafts, many students appreciate the structure and the guidance they receive along the way.

Fourth, for feedback to be received as intended, it must be timely, balanced with appreciation (e.g. for effort), and specific. Where student work to solve a problem shows a noble failure, give partial credit and reward the risk-taking; as Samuel Beckett said, “Try again, fail again, fail better” (7). Instead of calling writing “unclear,” guide the student concretely to “Expand and explain. Could you give an example?” (8) and return the work promptly with just a few such suggestions (9). If critical comments are sandwiched between strengths, the receiver often perceives respect and heeds the suggestions better. I have commented, for example, “This showed passion and used primary sources thoughtfully. Now have it add an opposing view. That would show fair-mindedness behind your passion and thought.” In the end, advise students to use ungraded feedback (whether their peers’ or yours) for revision, and graded feedback for broad lessons to carry to the next assignment, class, or professional responsibility.

Finally, for subjects where judgment calls are debatable, it can help to give deconstructive criticism by modeling openness to admitting we as teachers may be wrong (10). However, in instances where students fail to respect your authority or classroom management you may need to avoid such self-disclosure and instead focus on assertiveness and use of objective criteria. The larger point is to keep inquiring into what helps students accept and use feedback.

Applying this Teaching Method Online

The helpful hints above are relevant considerations for online learning, but online environments provide other opportunities to provide feedback to students on their academic performance. To clarify grading, post a rubric (11) for students beforehand. Also, save prior sample student work and your comments—on both strengths and suggestions—and post it (removing anything that identifies the student). That way, students can see what your grading criteria actually look like when work is done well and when it is done poorly. Clarifying grading expectations can be particularly important for nontraditional assignments, like blog posts (12), infographics (13), and digital stories (14), which are sometimes more common in online learning environments.

Students who have assessed the quality of their own work first are sometimes more receptive to instructor feedback. For writing assignments, consider having students read their drafts aloud and record those readings using voice memo tools available on computers and cell phones (15). When students listen to their work read aloud, they are likely to pick up on errors they missed while writing. The Writer’s Diet test is another online tool for helping students self-assess their work, one that focuses on the importance of brevity in writing.

When responding to problem solutions or writing, use track changes and comments in word processing software (17) to provide not just suggestions but sample improvements. Save time by limiting such changes to a
In either face-to-face or online classes, in our guidelines and in all our feedback, we can remind students that we are not critiquing them as people but rather, we are critiquing their work, and that it all aims at helping them learn (just as faculty learn from well-done peer review). If we focus on friendly collaboration, even when we see problems in their work, we act as coaches, not executioners. Then we can look after their best interests while making the work of commenting and grading not only manageable but enjoyable. At the same time, we can get some payoff, by seeing improved student work over several semesters.

Assessing this Teaching Method

Providing feedback to students serves three purposes: 1) keeping students informed; 2) supporting improvement; and 3) communicating interest in students’ progress. How can you tell if feedback strategies are effective? A straightforward strategy is to observe the degree to which students understand and use the feedback. Is the work of your students improving? Another way to assess the effectiveness of feedback is to ask students to explain or paraphrase the feedback to you or to other students. If they cannot explain the meaning of the feedback, it may not be clear or complete. A third strategy is to ask students to suggest, on the basis of the feedback, how their or others’ work can be improved. This not only supports learning the content, it also is a metacognitive exercise that addresses how to learn most effectively. Developing ways of providing effective feedback can also save a great deal of time: a very practical benefit for the teacher.

References and Resources


2. See pro and con article series in (1997). American Psychologist, 52(11), 1182-1186. Also, see:


9. See hints for commenting on work, saving time, and grading criteria at the Hobart and William Smith Colleges Center for Teaching and Learning site: http://www.hws.edu/academics/ctl/writes_respond.aspx


11. Find free rubrics at http://rubistar.4teachers.org/


IDEA Paper No. 40: Getting Students to Read: Fourteen Tips, Hobson
IDEA Paper No. 41: Student Goal Orientation, Motivation, and Learning, Svinicki
IDEA Paper No. 42: Integrated Course Design, Fink
IDEA Paper No. 52: Considerations in Online Course Design, Creasman

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