

## Provided timely and frequent feedback on tests, reports, projects, etc., to help students improve

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### Why this Teaching Method Matters

Feedback that is both affirming and corrective is necessary for people to learn (1). Defined as information on the results of one's efforts, feedback that is clear, specific and timely motivates students to improve. Since feedback is most often connected to grading that follows assigned work or assessment activities, Walvoord and Anderson (2) say that grading "...encompasses tailoring the test or assignment to the learning goals of the course... offering feedback so students can develop as thinkers and writers, communicating about students' learning to appropriate audiences, and using results to plan improvements in the classroom..." (p. 1). Thus assessment provides feedback for both learners and teachers. Conversely, the absence of prompt useful feedback reduces interest in learning. When instructors provide students with

prompt feedback followed by discussion of incorrect responses, they are using one of the most powerful predictors of positive student outcomes. Walberg's meta-analysis of studies of educational interventions that had the greatest impact on student achievement in K-12 classrooms, found that instruction that incorporated feedback and correctives was one of most potent (3). A few years later, higher education began focusing on giving prompt feedback as one of its "Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education" (4). The authors explain, "Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses" (p. 4). Most recently, study of the human brain suggests that we are biologically wired to seek and use feedback (5, 6, 7).

### Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

If students are to benefit from feedback, it must not only be timely and frequent, but also useful for improving performance by addressing three areas: what students did well, what students need to improve on, and how to make this improvement. Feedback can take a variety of forms: 1) formative/summative, 2) individual/group, 3) written/coded comments, and 4) charts and rubrics of essential characteristics of assignments. Although giving detailed feedback is important, it may be even more important to give it in a timely manner (8, p.17). We will consider how to accomplish both, as well as how to encourage students to carefully read and use our feedback.

When providing feedback on tests, save 10 minutes after all tests have been collected to discuss responses to questions with the total class. This may be the teachable moment when students will best remember your test question, their incorrect answer, and your corrections. If you have multiple sections of the same course taking the same test later in the week, a discussion the follow-

ing week will be the next best time. As you correct tests, make notes for class feedback, recording a balance of what they did well as a class and areas for improvement. When returning tests, you are then prepared to give both total-group and individual feedback. Depending upon the type of test, a coding system can make providing feedback less time consuming (e.g., +A = good argument, +I = good integration, ?E = I question your evidence). Greater frequency of feedback can be attained by scheduling 4 short exams versus 2 long ones. By providing students with formative feedback on early exams you will help improve their performance on subsequent exams when similar thinking skills and format are involved (9).

Reports and projects feature student-constructed responses rather than right-wrong answers. Feedback will usually be qualitative and organized around the essential dimensions of the assignment. For example, when students are assigned to write a position paper on an ethical issue related to their career of choice, make a "pluscriteria chart" by drawing a large plus and labeling

the four quadrants with the following components of a paper: assignment, organization, format, and language. Under each component, expectations for the position paper are listed. Differing weights might be assigned to each of the 4 components depending upon the experience of the students. For example, format might be worth 20% for a freshman composition, but only 10% for a senior-capstone paper. An alternative to a criteria chart is a rubric, another form of scoring guide that identifies 4 to 6 essential characteristics of the final product and includes a scale with description of a range of performances from “excellent” to “needs work” (8). Instructors can complete the rubric and return it to students with the final letter grade on the project. A benefit of both the plus chart or rubric method of providing feedback is that students can assist in chart and rubric-making, becoming partners invested in the feedback process.

When returning tests, reports, and projects, showing the class a good model from last term (or current term with permission from the student) serves as specific feedback of what “hitting a bull’s eye” would look or sound like. Moreover, sharing a weak model you have developed as a non-exemplar is a feedback tool with high potential for student learning, allowing you to discuss differences between surface errors in punctuation and deep errors in organization and concept understanding.

Few things are more disappointing to instructors than providing detailed feedback to students, only to have them ignore it. When turning back papers, provide each student with a sheet of colored paper to resubmit in a week, with answers to these questions: 1) What was my feedback to you in this paper? 2) What did you learn about the assignment from my feedback? 3) What did you learn about yourself from my feedback? No grade is recorded until this sheet comes back.

At some point, you may feel that your feedback using these kinds of systems is not being attended to or understood and that individual discussions with students are necessary. While these discussions offer great potential, they undeniably require a great deal of time and under certain circumstances (e.g., with very poor student work or with individuals who may not take criticism well) they pose delicate interpersonal communication issues. Students may be anxious about face-to-face meetings or resistant to the feedback and advice you offer. In these situations, campus resources such as writing centers or subject-specific tutoring or other services can be very valuable, especially if you work with staff to keep track of your students’ engagement and progress. Demonstration of your concern for student progress may gradually lessen students’ hesitation to work directly with you and

allow them to be more receptive to direct communication about their work.

## Applying this Teaching Method Online

Online environments can be a boon for instructors who wish to increase the amount and quality of feedback provided to students in class. Such feedback can be provided synchronously or asynchronously. It can be high-stakes or developmental, quantitative or qualitative, and instructor or peer-based. All of this is available in face-to-face classes, but the online environment expands and streamlines access both in terms of time (online is available 24/7) and audiences (feedback can be obtained and aggregated from students as well as instructors). Instructors can provide synchronous, face-to-face feedback through online conferencing or they can rely on electronic tools, such as the commenting tools in word-processing software or the use of screen-casting (10). Self-paced multiple-choice questions, for instance, can be pre-programmed and graded instantly, making feedback available to students immediately upon completion of the activity. Instructors can also provide feedback on essays and other types of subjective assignments more quickly, as grading them no longer requires carrying around and distributing stacks of paper. Students can also provide feedback to each other, both anonymously and identifiably, through tools such as discussion forums, polls, questionnaires, glossaries, blogs, wikis, etc. Online environments can also enable peer evaluation, which is a valuable tool, especially in the context of collaborative work. As long as the process is well-managed and the “rules” are clear, collaboration can teach students how to improve their writing, work productively with others, produce better final papers, and reduce “social loafing.” Online environments also provide rich analytics that can be used by instructors as feedback for them to improve teaching effectiveness (e.g., utilization of which resources or activities led to higher grades?). Online courses also give students private portal access to their own progress reports on a real-time basis, making it possible to answer the perennial “where do I stand” question. In general, feedback moves from being an after-the-fact instance to becoming concurrent (even preventative) and continuous. Finally, you can get feedback about student reactions to or concerns about the course by enlisting one or more students who can act as liaisons with other class members, thus allowing students to provide anonymous feedback about the course and their learning.

## Assessing this Teaching Method

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Do we assign tests, reports, and projects in order to promote student learning or are they merely instruments for summative evaluation to determine grades? They can and should serve both a teaching and evaluation function (2). In order to serve the teaching function, feedback can come during the draft stages of papers and projects. The instructor segments the assigned project with drafts of each part due over the course of the term. Brief, holistic feedback is provided to the class as each part is submitted and assessed (the installment plan). It is suggested that you carefully read at least the first couple pages of all drafts, skimming the rest to look for glaring errors in understanding that are reported back to the total class. I encourage students to write a note atop their drafts if they have specific areas of concern, highlighting the text so I can locate it easily and respond. It is important not to give students the answer or rewrite their papers for them, but provide corrective feedback so students can think for themselves and apply your feedback to their papers.

Two final concerns worth mentioning are student attitudes and student privacy. Student receptivity to instructor feedback can be negative, regardless of its validity or positive intent. Keeping students in control of the process may reduce any frustrations they face, as well as assist their learning. For multiple-choice tests, allow

students to write out an explanation of why their answer is a correct response. With essay tests, reports, or project, allow students to write a paragraph explaining why their evaluation of their performance is different from yours. This paragraph can be discussed during office hours. Frame your comments objectively focusing on the weaknesses of the student's paper rather than the weaknesses of the student personally. This will maintain the student's dignity and motivation to put forth effort in the future.

Asking students to provide peer-to-peer feedback on tests, reports, and projects is a tempting time-saver, but this should only be done in draft stages and with your coaching as to what constitute helpful feedback. Remember that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student educational records. Therefore, allowing students to see the final grades of another student on tests, reports, or projects is a FERPA violation and should be avoided. When you use peer-provided feedback, it should be formative in nature and not be confused with students grading each other.

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