Student Feedback

Diane Cassidy and Desiré Taylor

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

**Introduction**

Feedback is important to both students and instructors. It allows students the opportunity to identify what they have learned or mastered and what is yet to be learned or mastered. It allows instructors the opportunity to identify what has been mastered and what needs further instruction and attention. Feedback comes in many forms from grades on assignments to comments in the classroom. Feedback can encompass all components of the education setting from course content mastery to student success as a college student and member of society. It can be as simple as a numeric grade or as complex as a detailed analysis of students' work. The depth and breadth of feedback provided by an instructor variy depending on the course being taught, the assignment being graded, and the quality of the students' work.

Two types, or categories of feedback will be discussed: content and behavioral. Content feedback relates to the students' mastery of course content. This includes the students' process of attaining mastery as well as students' demonstration of that attainment. Behavioral feedback relates to student demeanor and conduct both as a student and as a developing professional member of the students' chosen fields.

**Content Feedback**

Grades, the most basic form of student feedback, can be provided in written and verbal form though generally it is written on an assignment and often posted in an online grade book such as Moodle. A numeric or letter grade provides a student with his/her measured understanding of content evaluated in a particular assignment and ultimately in a completed course.

Critiques or analyses can be as brief or as detailed as necessary. The depth and breadth of this form of feedback are determined by the particulars of the assignment being evaluated. A math exam, for example, might require that a specific process be followed solving problems. When evaluating the process and not simply the result, more detailed feedback would be given. Written assignments require more detailed feedback unless the writing is done simply to state a correct response. In this case, it is either right or wrong and no further detail is necessary.

Clarity, consistency, and completeness are important when grading written work. Writing is a work-in-process and ever evolving, no matter the subject. Useful feedback fosters growth during this process. Spelling does count and so does grammar when considering the structural portion of written work. Content considerations deal with the subject of the written work. How well is the question answered or the topic addressed? Style is often a matter of taste but as long as the question is answered and it is done so using correct grammar and spelling, style can be considered secondarily.

**Behavior Feedback**

Professionalism encompasses both competence and demeanor. As we work to develop professionals, we must consider the whole person. We share our discipline expertise but should

also serve as mentors working to grow the entire individual. Education should extend beyond the course content or subject matter. Take full advantage of teachable moments. Students come to college from varying backgrounds and often with limited understanding of the workplace or societal expectations. They are often accustomed to being allowed to submit work late or have multiple opportunities to improve on an assignment before it is graded. While this encourages completion and good grades, it does not instill a strong sense of personal responsibility, discipline, or even self-confidence. Encourage students to do their best on the first try and allow them to learn from their mistakes. Students will not think or problem-solve if we do not let them; they will not own their learning without some degree of failure.

<div align="center">**Communicating Expectations & Feedback**</div>

**Written**

Course expectations tell our students what they need to do in order to successfully complete our courses. These expectations need to be clearly stated and presented early, at the beginning of the semester.

Generally, expectations are listed or outlined in the course syllabus. This provides one place to which students can refer and should include at least a statement about behavioral expectations as well. If you do not want students to behave disrespectfully, for example, tell them so. Be sure to state your limits of acceptance. If profanity is not to be allowed, say so. If coming to class late is not allowed, say so. If late work is not to be accepted, say so. These are just a few examples. Each instructor's expectations will differ. What is important is that expectations be communicated, fully and early and that they be repeated or referred to as often as necessary.

Grading rubrics provide an excellent method for communicating expectations as well as a tool for providing feedback. Students can be made fully aware of the expectations of an assignment prior to beginning work on the assignment. Earned and missed points then directly correlate to the parts of the rubric making feedback clear, presenting no surprises.

Email is often the method of choice for communication employed by today's students. Whether a class is delivered online, in the classroom, or a combination of the two, an instructor's email inbox gets quite full, regularly. If you do not want to deal with this form of communication, particularly if you teach a seated or hybrid class, then make this preference (or mandate if that is the case) known to your class early in the semester. If email is acceptable or preferred, establish rules for content and parameters for managing. For example, it is a good idea to mandate that the subject line be the course letters and numbers (such as LBST 1100). If you teach multiple sections of the same course, you might mandate that the course section be included in the subject line as well. This allows you to readily identify the email as coming from one of your students and not spam. In addition, a labeled email allows you to manage filing the email when finished. (I recommend that you retain all student email indefinitely. You never know when a situation might arise that requires documentation of communication).

Feedback, in the form of email replies, is very important. This feedback includes both your response to the question, issue, or situation addressed in the email as well as directives for handling electronic communication. The prevalence of technology and the relative ease with which our students use it make it easy for students to not see the lines of formality necessary when the communication is between a teacher and student. Feedback directing, or redirecting when necessary, will serve students well when they are in the workplace later.

**Verbal**

Instructors generally hold regular office hours. These hours provide times for students to drop in to ask a question, seek clarification, or just talk about a class. These informal meetings provide excellent opportunities for students and teachers to get to know one another and build professional relationships. These meetings also provide outstanding opportunities for instructors to mentor their students and provide feedback that fosters professional excellence. Note that feedback in these settings might have nothing whatsoever to do with a student's grade or work in class but rather with the development of the person, the professional the student is striving to become.

Class time is verbal by design. We lecture; we ask questions; we respond to answers given by our students. Whether the classroom format is a traditional lecture, lab, flipped classroom, or other active learning method, generally, there is verbal communication. Whenever there is give-and-take between students and teachers, there is a form of feedback given. How we talk to our students effects learning positively or negatively. Carefully select your words, and think before you speak. Use this time to guide and nurture. This fosters learning while creating a non-threatening but constructive environment.

**Immediate Feedback**

Although clickers have been used on the UNC Charlotte campus for over a decade, its popularity among faculty has increased significantly in the last few years after the launch of the Turning Point software and its ease of integration with Moodle.  A clicker is a device, about the size of a cell phone that allows students to participate in class, while having their responses/participation recorded. Clickers' responses include: simple answer, numeric, multiple

choice, True/False, or just simple participation. Clickers can also be used to collect data, poll

groups, record attendance, and even to submit responses from quizzes. This makes clickers an

ideal tool to promote attendance and in class participation. Some of the teaching advantages of

clickers:

- Records attendance multiple times during a lecture

- Reduces the amount of grading of in-class assignments

- Provides immediate detailed feedback

- Current software (Turning Technologies) allows instructors to prepare questions for the

  Lecture ahead of time in a Power Point format or make up questions during lecture.

Arguably, the immediate and detailed feedback given is the most valuable property of clickers.

Turning Point allows for a variety of data and statistics about the groups' response to be

displayed at the close of each question.

As in the case with clickers, self-graded quizzes or "trade and grade" quizzes can provide

the same benefit to the student as it will shed light on misunderstandings, misconceptions or

lack of required techniques. The disadvantage of these types of assessments is that they do not

provide the same feedback to the instructor, and the grade may not be reliable enough to be

calculated into the course grade, which in turn will diminish the incentive for students to fully

participate.

**Delayed Feedback**

Delayed feedback is most often provided on assignments like homework, tests, and

projects, and it is a critical part of the learning process. The format of this feedback is content

and situation dependent

Although courses such as Language Arts or Communication first come to mind when thinking about verbal feedback, it can be a great feedback tool in many environments. Verbal feedback has the benefit of two-way communication in which students can participate in the conversation about their feedback. In addition, it provides an opportunity for instructors to aid in the interpretation of the feedback and with follow up guidance. In situations where verbal feedback is given in groups, during class discussions or by peers, it is beneficial to other participants of the assignment for considering the feedback of others. However, it is important for instructors to remain aware of student confidentiality and to be sensitive when giving "public" feedback.

Written feedback can range from a grade being posted to a Moodle gradebook, to a detailed report provided to students. Written feedback should be given on every graded assignment. Feedback that is timely and detailed will give students the best chance at making improvement soon enough to benefit them in consequent assignments. It is important to help students understand where incorrection exists, but furthermore, to help guide them to the correct response. When topic or large course numbers make it difficult to give such detailed responses, it is recommended to provide a comprehensive rubric before the assignment and detailed solutions key in response of it to accompany the grading/feedback.

## Issues with Feedback

To maximize the effectiveness of feedback, it is helpful to focus on the interpretation of feedback. Feedback is often the first prompt to a student informing him/her that an adjustment is needed in the work that they are delivering. Where many students will not be satisfied with any assignment grade less than an A, others will be very content with the lowest passing grade.

It is crucial to help students understand what their grade means, their standing in the course, and what can be done. Some helpful techniques include:

- Providing a scatterplot with all of the grade data points for a particular assignment or course average to give students an idea of the percentile that they fall within. For instance, a student whom received – and was content with a grade of 73% on an assignment may feel differently if he/she realizes that it is the second lowest grade in the class, or that the class average was 91%.

- Creating and distributing a chart with feedback for students whom fall in certain categories, for example, all grades on a test that are on the interval.

  - 60 – 69% will receive a message, "This is not a passing grade. Please consider making use of the tutorial center or SI sessions."

  - Less than 60% will receive a message, "This is not a passing grade. Please make an appointment with your instructor so that we can work out a recovery plan for you."

Be prepared to assist students with an action plan to get back on track. Most departments have recourses set to assist students to receive extra help. In addition, the UCAE (University Center for Academic Excellence) provides tutoring assistance. In the event that it appears that the students may not be able to salvage his/her grade during the current semester, the student may be advised about his/her withdrawal options.

It is common for freshmen students to have preconceived expectations of feedback. Often, the expectation will be that feedback at the college level will similar to what they have received in high school. Thus, it is important for instructors to communicate the details of feedback in any given course, with specific emphasis on reminding students of their own

responsibility in accessing feedback. It is a good idea to remind students to keep a list of their

own grades throughout the semester, frequently check the Moodle gradebook, and to consult

with their instructor when needed.

FERPA, (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), enacted in 1974, serves to protect

the confidential handling of students' information, including grades and feedback, and, "The

primary purpose of FERPA is to protect the privacy of student information, and this protection

is achieved by controlling access to and disclosure of students' "education records," as that

term is defined in FERPA" (http://legal.uncc.edu/legal-topics/ferpa/introduction-ferpa).

References

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). (2015, February 5). Retrieved March 9,

2015, from http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html