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Moving Beyond the Transmission of Feedback: Strategies to Engage Students

Feedback shapes behavior and influences academic success. In their meta-analysis of over 250 studies, Black and Wiliam found that feedback promoted learning and achievement “across all content areas, knowledge and skill types, and levels of education.”¹ Feedback should help students better understand the learning objective, their present level of performance in relation to the learning objective, and ways to meet or exceed the learning objective.² Here, I use feedback to represent oral and written communication provided by a teacher to a student based on an assessment of student written work. The purpose of this paper is to explore my experience with feedback and present several strategies that go beyond a mere transmission of feedback.

My Lived Experience

When I think back on my development as a writer, I recall three significant classroom experiences, each of which involved feedback. First, as a middle school student, I learned that writing was a recursive process influenced by the comments of peers and the teacher. Drafts were edited and revised numerous times based on external feedback. Second, in English 101, I was stunned by the constructive criticism I received. I had been successful in high school English classes and naïvely believed I was a decent writer. After I got over the initial shock, I began to seek out feedback and attended conferences with my professor, inspired by our discussions. Third, in a college writing course, I studied structures of the English language and elements of style. Conversations with peers and professors were powerful. I could hear how my writing affected an audience and discuss new ways to convey meaning. In this way feedback was dialogic and relational.

I am serious about teaching and expect students to take learning seriously. Assessing student work is time-consuming and emotionally draining. I pour over pages and contemplate

the best way to provide feedback, considering where I should focus, how much to say, and the phrasing of comments. I believe students deserve and grow from such individualized and sustained attention. That said, I have not always been content with the return on my investment. At times, I felt I spent more effort providing feedback on an assignment than students spent preparing the assignment. I questioned if students even read my comments, and if so, why they continued to do (or not do) the same things. I was frustrated and driven to better understand why my methods were not always successful. Through reflection, I realized that I needed to change my feedback practices to mirror the rich learning opportunities I had as a student..

Paths to Rich Feedback

In individualized classrooms, teachers start where the student is, build in relevance, and adapt instructional approaches as the student grows.³ I need to know my students to create effective learning opportunities for them. What prior knowledge do they bring to writing and the subject? What are their strengths and challenges? How can I offer suggestions without silencing their voice? I can utilize a personally relevant example to illustrate a point; provide the right balance of challenge and support to scaffold development; and use empathy to build rapport. The amount and type of feedback is tailored for each student; moreover, it changes as the student's skills and knowledge grows. In this way, feedback is developmental.

Yet feedback is not merely a cognitive process; it involves emotional dimensions as well. The emotional component associated with formative assessment ranges from feelings of personal investment, to anxiety, to the development of a student's self-perception and self-efficacy.⁴ Additionally, it can affect students' attitude toward learning. For instance, positive feedback given to high-achieving students was likely to reinforce their motivation while repeated critical feedback given to low-achieving students was likely to discourage them.⁵

Moreover, if, as I believe, education is intended to help students become effective learners, then feedback should contribute to this development. Students must be co-constructors of feedback. In this process, they become self-regulated learners. Numerous studies show that self-regulated learners take control of their learning and are less dependent on external support. Specifically, self-regulated learners are higher achievers and more resourceful, confident, and persistent.⁶ In short, rich feedback should empower students to be active agents in their intellectual and emotional development.

Common Challenges

“Feedback is effective only if it helps students improve their work. Thus, the most important characteristic of feedback is that students understand it and use it.”⁷ Yet, extant literature indicates a gap exists between feedback provided and feedback used.⁸ Instructors may use cryptic comments to convey a message, one which they presume is clear but students find too vague, abstract, or ambiguous.

Furthermore, Sadler argues that students need certain prerequisite knowledge and skills to effectively use feedback. First, students must *comply with the task*, which requires them to understand what is asked so their submitted response matches the task specifications. Second, students must create *quality* work, making sure the “work comes together as a whole to achieve its intended purpose.”⁹ Third, students must use criteria, from straightforward conditions such as word length or referencing style to abstract notions like coherence, evidence, originality, and rigor. Such knowledge and skills are not implicit. It is important, therefore, that instructors directly teach, model, and provide opportunities for practice.

Effective Feedback

Effective feedback is timely and regular; focused on work and process; non-judgmental; clear, specific, and concrete; and balanced, including both positive and negative feedback and next steps. Professors can enhance feedback in the following ways:

- Foster formal and informal conversations.¹⁰ Create opportunities where students can talk about task demands, benchmark their work against assessment criteria, and follow up with conversations about feedback.
- Prioritize feedback. Limit comments to a few areas per paper, thereby making feedback manageable.¹¹ Also, emphasize comments rather than grades, as feedback comments alone have the greatest affect on students' growth.¹²
- Feed forward.¹³ Provide comments on the submitted work that are intended to help the student improve subsequent work.
- Model assignments and how to fix problem areas.¹⁴ Show students multiple ways to address problems in a particular piece and prevent similar problems in the future.
- Use multiple channels.¹⁵ Consider written and oral feedback. Discussions can occur during workshops, tutorials, office hours, etc., or electronically via audio and video files.
- Differentiate feedback.¹⁶ Adjust the amount of and vocabulary used to share feedback, considering the task and student's strengths and challenges.

As previously indicated, it is important to engage students and collaborate with them through the feedback process so they take control of their learning. Students can be exercise agency by do the following:

- Provide a cover letter to accompany the assignment, which includes topics such as main arguments and perceived strengths or weaknesses of the paper.¹⁷ The letter initiates

dialogue between the writer-student and reader-instructor, which is continued when the writer responds to the reader's comments.

- Describe the kinds of feedback preferred.¹⁸ Ask questions and identify areas where they would like help.
- Share instructor feedback with peers.¹⁹ Discuss comments, share feedback that they found useful, or collaborate to make an action plan to improve subsequent assignments.
- Use peer feedback or appraisal.²⁰ These tools provide students opportunities to elucidate assignment requirements and assessment criteria; see multiple ways to construct quality responses; and critically comment on work. Peer feedback and appraisal serve dual roles, benefitting both the reviewer and the author.

Implications for the Classroom

Taking these tips into consideration, I have implemented several strategies to both teach students about and involve them in feedback. In the past, I placed many marks on students' papers in response to form and content. I included praise, comments, questions, examples, suggestions, rationales for the suggestions, invitations for meetings, etc. Nearly every time I sat down to grade, I wished I could talk with the student then and there, when the paper was fresh in both of our minds. Recently, I began using conferences as a way engage students in dialogue about their written work. Students are expected to come to conferences with a printed copy of their work and prepared with specific questions or concerns. (I provide prompts or scaffolding questions when needed.) In these one-on-one conferences, I can better assess student needs and we can collaborate on ways to enhance student writing.

I began facilitating workshops on feedback two years ago. I spend time at the beginning of the semester (and follow-up throughout the semester) talking about, modeling, and role

playing the feedback process. We discuss the purpose, expectations, and goals for feedback. We analyze examples of effective and ineffective feedback, eventually creating a list of recommended “dos” and “don’ts.” Sometimes I share the feedback I have received on my own writing and how I use that to strengthen manuscripts. Students work in collaborative groups to practice assessing work, creating thoughtful and useful clarifying questions for their peers, and giving and receiving feedback.

Previously, I have required P.A.S.S. sheets be submitted with assignments. These are coversheets that detail the writer’s purpose (P), the audience (A) to whom he/she is writing, a brief overview of the subject (S), and how the writer presents him-/her-self (S) through tone and rhetorical devices. The P.A.S.S. sheet serves multiple purposes. It helps students bring a critical eye to their work, as they have to identify several significant elements of their writing. It also provides me with a snapshot of their paper and a way to better understand why and how students composed the piece. It anchors my feedback, as I make direct comments about the links I see (or do not see) between the P.A.S.S. sheet and written assignment.

Electronic dialogical journals have been particularly helpful in the research courses I teach. At the beginning of the semester, students select a partner. I set up a space in Moodle where the partners and I can have weekly conversations. Our dialogue includes assigned readings and progress on research projects. Often partners use each other to clarify questions, brainstorm ideas and flesh out concepts, and request and receive feedback on their research projects. I use dialogical journals to extend conversations and provide students opportunities to co-construct new knowledge. Typically, I participate in the dialogue on a weekly basis.

I plan to try a new practice, which I call “show me the growth.” Once students have feedback, I want them to use it. To encourage students to feed-forward, I will require them to

submit subsequent written assignments with a brief cover letter describing and substantiating how previous feedback influenced their current work. These are a few of the strategies I have used and want to enhance to provide students with rich feedback. To be clear, I do not use all strategies in every course. I choose what to do and when based on my understanding of what students and a class needs at a given time.

Conclusion

It is commonly accepted that feedback is “central to the development of effective learning.”²¹ Effective feedback is usable and used by students to deepen understandings and enhance written communication. Instructors can best serve their students by demystifying the feedback process, feeding forward, and making feedback dialogical. Feedback is a complex process influenced by and influencing myriad factors. This paper is not meant to be a comprehensive review, but rather an attempt to surface my experiences and share several strategies that can be used to engage and empower students.

¹ As cited in David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning: A Model and Seven Principles of Good Feedback Practice,” *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2006): 204.

² D. Royce Sadler, “Beyond Feedback: Developing Student Capability in Complex Appraisal,” *Assessment & Education in Higher Education* 35, no. 2 (2010): 535-550.

³ Joseph DiMartino and Sherri Miles, “Strategies for Successful Personalization,” *Principal Leadership* 6, no. 10 (2006): 26-30; Eliot Levine, *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons from a Small School* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2002); Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004).

⁴ David Carless, "Differing Perceptions in the Feedback Process," *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2006): 219-233; Patricia Cartney, "Exploring the Use of Peer Assessment as a Vehicle for Closing the Gap Between Feedback Given and Feedback Used," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 5 (2010): 551-564; Nicole and Mcfarlane-Dick, "Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning;" Ursula Wingate, "The Impact of Formative Feedback on the Development of Academic Writing," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 5 (2010): 519-533.

⁵ Wingate, "The Impact of Formative Feedback."

⁶ Paul R. Pintrich, P. (1995). *Understanding Self-Regulated Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Barry Zimmerman and Dale Schunk, D, "Self-Regulated Intellectual Processes and Outcomes: A Social Cognitive Perspective," in David Yun Dai & Robert J. Sternbery, eds., *Motivation, Emotion and Cognition* (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

⁷ Susan Brookhart, "Tailoring feedback: Effective Feedback Should be Adjusted Depending on the Needs of the Learner," *Education Digest*, 76, no. 9 (2011): 33-34.

⁸ Cartney, "Exploring the Use of Peer Assessment;" Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, "Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning;" Wingate, "The Impact of Formative Feedback."

⁹ Sadler, "Beyond Feedback," 544.

¹⁰ See Mary Bart, "Creating and Ongoing Feedback Loop with Your Students," July 2, 2012, *Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications*, <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/creating-an-ongoing-feedback-loop-with-your-students> (accessed September 11, 2013); Maryellen Weimer, "Why Doesn't Teacher Feedback Improve Student Performance?" May 26, 2012, *Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching*

Strategies from Magna Publications, <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-andlearning/why-doesnt-teacher-feedback-improve-student-performance> (accessed September 11, 2013)

¹¹ See Brookhart, “Tailoring Feedback;” Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning.”

¹² See Ruth Butler, “Enhancing and Undermining Intrinsic Motivation: The Effects of Task-Involving and Ego-Involving Evaluation on Interest and Involvement,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 58 (1988): 1-14.

¹³ See Cartney, “Exploring the Use of Peer Assessment,” and Weimer, “Why Doesn’t Teacher Feedback Improve Student Performance?”

¹⁴ See Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning,” and Weimer, “Why Doesn’t Teacher Feedback Improve Student Performance?”

¹⁵ See Bart, “Creating an Ongoing Feedback Loop” and Cartney, “Exploring the Use of Peer Assessment.”

¹⁶ See Brookhart, “Tailoring Feedback.”

¹⁷ See David Nicol, “From Monologue to Dialogue: Improving Written Feedback Processes in Mass Higher Education,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 5 (2010): 501-517, and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning.”

¹⁸ See Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, “Formative Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Cartney, “Exploring the Use of Peer Assessment,” and Nicol, “From Monologue to Dialogue.”

²¹ Sadler, “Beyond Feedback,” 536.

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