GIVING STUDENT FEEDBACK

PURPOSE
Giving feedback or the ‘coaching of learning’ is at the heart of effective instruction. This tool presents some principles and practices of giving feedback.

DESCRIPTION
The word ‘Feedback’, as used in an educational context, differs slightly from its common usage. That is to say, feedback as used here is distinct from both assessment and evaluation.

The results of an assessment may be feedback, depending on how they’re presented. The results may also simply be information. Evaluation happens when the results of an assessment are compared to some standard. In order to be feedback, information from assessments or evaluations must be presented for the purpose of improving future performance.

By this definition, writing comments on a student’s draft paper could be considered feedback, while explaining the reasons for a B- on a final would be notes to the evaluation. In the first example, both instructor and student hold the expectation that the feedback will be used to improve future drafts. In the second case, however, neither instructor nor student views the information as a meaningful contributor to future performance.

This also means that the traditional distinction between formative and summative feedback is somewhat overstated. Formative feedback is feedback for the short term and usually happens as part of the learning process before an assessment or evaluation. Summative feedback is simply formative feedback for a longer term and that marks improvement at convenient summary moments, usually following an assessment or evaluation.

Of course these distinctions are somewhat artificial, but they point out something important: unless information on student performance is given in an attempt to improve that performance, it isn’t really feedback. Keeping this in mind, there are several principles that help instructors ensure that their commentary is indeed instructional feedback.

- Feedback is always positive feedback. There is feedback about what to change rather than about what to keep doing, but in a sense, there is no such thing as negative feedback. Constructive criticism is just that — constructive. What’s often referred to as negative feedback is often simply criticism or punishment and is of little instructional value. Yelling at a child for acting out is punishment (and maybe reinforcement). Helping the child recognize the unwanted behavior and then helping him overcome it is a very helpful negative feedback. Simply docking points can be a negative motivator or a punishment, but rarely feedback.

- Feedback is always personal. If you think giving good feedback is hard, just try receiving it. Many instructors want to think that all commentary is only about the work (not the student), and that students should know this. It is the rare adult, however, who can listen to feedback with no ego-engagement, yet we often ask this of young adults. Giving good feedback, therefore, lies in the ability to present information about performance, while maintaining or even strengthening personal identity.

- Feedback has little to do with grades. Points, numbers, and letters might report on assessments or evaluation, but they are stripped of the specific information that could make them useful as feedback. In fact, when feedback and grades are given at the same time, the feedback is inevitably interpreted as justification of the evaluation and thereby loses its feedback value. Where possible, it’s far better to clearly separate the giving of feedback, and the evaluation of performance. For example, an instructor might give feedback on a paper, but then post the grade in I-learn and make it available only after the student has received and processed the feedback.

- Feedback has everything to do with trust. Because so much of the effectiveness of feedback relies on how it is perceived and received by the student, the relationship the student has with the instructor will be the lens through which commentary is interpreted. Trust can be built through personal relationships, transparent

http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools

©Copyright 2016 BYU–Idaho
evaluation, and the tone of the feedback.

- **Feedback comes from the Coach, not the Statistician.** Knowing that he struck-out on the last three at-bats does little to help a baseball player improve his performance. It might serve as a fear-of-failure type of motivation, but it has little value as feedback. Working with a batting coach, however, who can help him understand where he can improve over the mistakes of the past, is very useful.

- **Feedback is behavioral as well as informational.** Feedback, both on things to keep and things to change, acts as a re-enforcer. That is to say that it re-enforces either an increase or a decrease in a certain behavior, but it re-enforces non-the-less. Along with the information given in a feedback context, the way it’s given acts to re-enforce current and future student actions.

- **Feedback is always time and context bound.** If information can be generalized, aggregated, and used on an organizational level, it is no longer instructional feedback. Feedback is for the individual or group, to the individual or group, about specific individual or group performances. Feedback is never generalized or decontextualized. It should also be delivered in a timely way so the learner is still close to the experience.

**EXAMPLE**

Upon close reflection, James realized that he gave his students very little feedback. He used grading as both a carrot and a stick, but that was more about motivation than feedback. He also had frequent quizzes and exams, so both he and the students would know where they stood at any given moment. But that was more evaluation than feedback because the information didn’t really help the students do better, except maybe by getting them to work harder. But there again, that was motivation and not feedback.

When he corrected papers, he was careful to write positive and as well as corrective comments. Yet the corrective comments usually pointed out what was wrong more that they taught the students how to correct it. His comments tended to be more constructive criticism than instructive criticism.

Determined to improve aspects of feedback for his class, James contemplated the following changes:

- Train students to give feedback and then allow them to provide feedback in a way that wouldn’t be viewed as assessment or evaluation.
- Add a class requirement that students visit during office hours once before midterm and once after to ask questions and receive feedback.
- Separate commenting on papers from evaluating them. Create two separate processes.
- Use class-time not just to ‘go over the answers’ after a test, but to discuss how and why people might have made mistakes.
- Use the online, anonymous surveys in I-Learn to provide the students a channel for giving feedback to him as the instructor of the course.

**TIPS**

- **Use 3-1 rule.** A good way to maintain the ego-integrity of the student while giving feedback is to follow the 3-1 rule. Present three things the student should continue doing for every 1 thing s/he needs to change.
- **Decouple feedback from grading.** Consider not connecting or the sequence of communicating feedback verse grading.

**PITFALLS**

- **Relationships.** Giving effective feedback is very difficult in the absence of trust. If you don’t have a well established relationship of trust with the student, tread lightly and go slowly.
- **Timeliness.** Feedback is most effective when given in a timely manner.

**KEY ARTICLES**


**OTHER RESOURCES**

- Assessment as feedback