Effective Feedback

Feedback is definitely more of an art than a science. Yet there are also methods and approaches to be learned that can make feedback more consistent, reliable, objective and fair, even if it never reaches the level of "scientific."

Feedback is best offered throughout a course and using a variety of different methods. These methods can be as diverse as

- a well-constructed rubric that guides both the student’s performance of an assignment as well as forming the template for your grading
- an in-person, phone or virtual conference between you and a student
- carefully chosen written comments on papers and in response to projects
- follow up questions and comments in discussion
- video or audio comments to the whole class concerning the overall performance on an assignment, pointing out issues and problems shared by more than one student

Feedback is most effective when it is

- **Reinforcing what constitutes good performance**—faculty should establish and make known the expectations, goals and standards for each assignment and activity in the course and when falling short, how students can begin to close up the gap
- **Timely**—ideally delivered before the student embarks on the next or follow up assignment; timeliness also defined by expectations and type of activity—for example, feedback on discussion should be provided either during the period of discussion itself or following the end of that discussion period.
- **Appropriate** in regard to the type of assignment, task, and student level of knowledge/expertise—for example, if you ask students to write a personal reflection, it would be odd to criticize them for not providing a review of the literature on the topic.
- **Focused and analytic**—rather than simply correcting or circling every error, identify patterns and provide one or two examples for improvement. This is a particularly important principle for faculty who are not writing instructors but who want to provide feedback on writing in their discipline.
- **Maps to the grading and other criteria for an assignment**—circles back to the assignment instructions and rubrics, the assignment criteria. If you expect students to adhere to your assignment instructions, then reinforce those criteria in your own feedback
Some Categories of Feedback

Acknowledgement—

- This can be the written equivalent of the classroom nod or word of encouragement. But it must be more than a simple, "That's great" or "Good job." It acknowledges the student's contribution by articulating what he or she did well, indicates that the instructor is listening but may also stimulate further discussion or exploration. Examples of this are the following:

  *In discussion: Joe and several others have made the point that X and Y, but I wonder if anyone has come across any additional corroborating evidence for this idea?*

  *For an individual assignment: Annie, you have successfully balanced the complex and even contradictory aspects of this problem in your analysis.*

Reinforcement—

- Reinforcement indicates to the student that he or she is on the right track and should continue in that vein. This reinforcement can be both public and private in nature. An example of private reinforcement might be the following:

  *This clearly demonstrates your grasp of X, but isn't Y also central to your thesis?*

  An example of public reinforcement might be:

  *Most of you have grasped how to apply the principles we demonstrated yesterday as demonstrated by the problem solutions you submitted. Be sure to continue to apply these principles to the practice problems for this week.*

Follow up and elaboration on specific points—
• In many cases students make observations but do not adequately follow up on their findings. An example is the following:

*You have made a strong statement here about X, but have you considered the ramifications of this theory? Can you expand on this?*

**Correction and Redirection** —

• This is task-orientated feedback that offers a critique and might involve correction of a student who is off track, unresponsive to the assignment or one who has given insufficient attention to some part of the assignment. It's important to focus on just a few of the most important factors when the student has a multitude of errors. Two examples of this are the following:

*This is an interesting series of observations which while valid in themselves, do not seem directly related to the assignment questions. In particular, it appears you have not answered the central question of X. You have also given short shrift to the question of Y and need to offer more verification of your findings.*

*What resources have you found to support your conclusions? This paper makes a good start with a strong thesis, but would gain much by a sharpening of focus and some additional research.*

**Open Up Inquiry to Others** —

• This is a type of feedback that occurs in a discussion in order to facilitate greater participation. An example is:

*Joe has made an interesting comment about the prevalence of smart phones being due to the circulation of greater wealth in society as well as more competitive prices and choices, and this was echoed by Mary's observation on the proliferation of electronic communication gadgets among the middle class in India. Does anyone else want to test this observation in regard to some of the other developing countries we have been studying?*

**Summary** —

• This is another public technique and can be used to help focus student discussion after a busy or potentially confusing round of messages. An example is:
Mary made an interesting comment that was echoed by Joe... But Lance and Janet have noted that this only affects a small minority of the population in each country. It seems that we are coming to a consensus that this observation does apply to most developing countries but with some important caveats. Can anyone suggest some of these exceptions?

Suggestions for Further Exploration—

- This points the way for students to grow. It is particularly important to include in feedback on major projects and papers and in the first stages of an incremental assignment. An example is:
  
  *Your paper has thoroughly examined the roots of X. Well done! Another area that might have been included here is Y. This might be a worthy subject for future research since it is closely related to the phenomena you have already noted. There is additional resource material listed under our bibliography that you can explore on this topic.*

  Or for an incremental or scaffolded assignment:
  
  *Your draft has made a good start of analyzing the underlying roots of the problem but it remains for you to show how these trends reached their apex in later years. I recommend that you next tackle some of the contemporary accounts that describe those manifestations so that your final paper covers both required aspects of the topic.*

Tips for Offering Feedback on Assignments and in Discussion

- Avoid being too terse—give enough information to avoid ambiguity. Too much brevity, in electronic communications in particular, can be perceived as being curt, brusque, dismissive or cold, and students can often misinterpret the specific references for your comments unless you give adequate commentary. Be specific and give an indication of when students have taken the right or wrong direction. Assume that students want to grow and develop in their understanding.

- Be tactful and cautious when using humor—teasing or even mild sarcasm is easily misunderstood. Whenever you have to deliver what might be sensitive criticism, shade and soften your words with such phrases as "would be best to," "might want to," "it's recommended that," "might be better or more effective to," etc.

- Establish your approach to feedback and make your expectations clear with the first
assignment. Always provide a first, low stakes assignment (usually worth no more than 10-15% of the grade.) Give feedback on the first assignment within a short period of turnaround time.

- Use multiple methods for communication, depending on what is available to your students and what is appropriate for the type of feedback. In online courses, alternatives to text like audio and video or use of a whiteboard might be especially appropriate for certain assignments and use real time online communications whenever needed to clear up misunderstandings.

- Direct student attention to the focus of assignments and emphasize responsiveness to the assignment as a key factor of your judgment of student work. This approach is also one that helps in the case of suspected plagiarism—since plagiarism often introduces something extraneous to the assignment, a focus on the degree of responsiveness can enable you to critique the work without having to make what are often impossible judgments on plagiarism.

- Create rubrics whenever appropriate to guide students. A well-constructed rubric assists students in the creation of thorough, detailed and responsive assignments. It also eliminates many challenges to your comments and grades. Depending on the type of assignment, you might use a rubric to provide ready-made feedback and then simply add individualized comments as appropriate. In lieu of rubrics, detailed grading criteria should be offered.

- Refer back to your course learning objectives/outcomes whenever appropriate. Helping students understand the connections between their performance, the assignment and the course learning objectives often gives students a better sense of the context within which the assignment or assessment is grounded.

- When you design longer or more challenging assignments, stipulate incremental due dates so that you can provide feedback on each different task or stage—this emphasizes the importance of process and such “scaffolded” assignments allow students to improve through your feedback.

- Use formatting, color, different fonts, “track changes” and “comments” in Word or other methods to clearly distinguish your written feedback and identify to what your comments pertain. But make sure you explain your methods before the first assignment. Some students may never have heard of “track changes” and “comments” functions, and you should also not assume students understand your notation system or editing marks and other methods of commentary!

- Be careful about giving feedback on assignments when you are tired--we all tend to write
with less precision and care when we are fatigued. Take a break after grading a large number of papers or after experiencing a run of poor work--if you don't, you risk treating the next student's work more harshly! ("Darn, this is the third one in a row who has given me this sort of answer!") Consider making an initial pass and then a second pass through papers, changing the order of papers you grade.

- Don't dash off quick, casual emails to students when these contain partial evaluations of student work or answers to questions about the assignment requirements. Pause and make sure you can present the full picture to the student.
- Provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their own learning—either through writing a formal reflection piece, posting informal comments on a discussion forum set aside for this purpose, or a sharing exercise that asks students to chart their own progress in the class.

Some Further Reading
