

**FORMAL AND INFORMAL FEEDBACK TOOLS TO ENHANCE THE STUDENT  
LEARNING PROCESS**

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## **FORMAL AND INFORMAL FEEDBACK TOOLS TO ENHANCE THE STUDENT LEARNING PROCESS**

Feedback, while being an important part of the learning process, is often misunderstood and poorly constructed. A common complaint of feedback by the receiver is that the sender or giver only focuses on the negative aspect of the performance without providing any positive comments. Also, the feedback process is intended to be interactive where the receiver can disagree, ask a question, repeat information for understanding, or otherwise talk back in the communication process, whereas it often is not.

Another common myth is that instructors are the only ones providing feedback in the student learning process. The reality is that students also provide feedback to instructors and to their peers. So, recognizing and incorporating the different parties in the feedback communication process is important for student learning.

Perhaps the problem with providing effective feedback is simply that the sender does not know how, or have the tools, to adequately communicate the behavioral issues they wish to address. Since feedback is one of the important ingredients in the student learning process, we believe that the sender should be provided with feedback tools that are portable and adaptable. These tools should help reduce the anxiety experienced by receivers since they will experience a balanced feedback process and become active participants in the process.

The purpose of this paper is to identify effective feedback tools that are available for the various senders in the feedback loop, teachers and students, who are both senders and receivers in the feedback process. We believe that the use of these tools will help enhance the student learning process.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The use of feedback as part of the learning process is addressed in diverse areas of academia such as medicine, psychology, and educational instruction and leadership, among others. This is not surprising since feedback is seen as a key factor affecting learning and interpersonal communication (Eraut, 2006). Carless (2006) describes feedback as central to the development of effective learning. Feedback is also an essential component in the learning cycle providing for reflection and development (Weaver, 2006).

Feedback takes many different forms:

- It can be corrective or reinforcing (Estep, 2004; Hawe, Dixon & Watson, 2008),
- It helps to increase accountability (Wormeli, 2006),
- To be used for improvement (Carless, 2006),
- To provide a balance between positive and negative comments (Weaver, 2006)

Feedback should be communicated in a manner that is:

- Constructive and emotionally sensitive (Eraut, 2006),
- Helpful, clear and understandable (Reese-Durham, 2005).
- Prompt, meaningful and give students an opportunity to rethink and rework the errors of their efforts (Helterbran, 2005).

According to Brookhart (2008) feedback is effective only when it is translated into a clear, positive message that students can hear and understand. In addition, feedback should only focus on the qualities of the student's work or the processes and strategies used by the student to do the work and should never be personalized. Feedback is especially effective if it helps to explain gaps in knowledge and understanding of the subject (Weaver, 2006).

Estep (2004) recommends the following approach in order to ensure that feedback is effective:

- The evaluator should show consideration and describe specific behaviors without belittling the receiver.
- The timing of the feedback is critical and must be provided as close to the time of the behavior as possible.
- The evaluator should recognize that the receiver is not obligated to change in response to the feedback, and should check on the emotional and physically readiness of the receiver if at all possible prior to providing feedback.
- The feedback should be provided with as much clarity as possible.

Eraut (2006) reminds us that feedback can occur in a number of different settings. These include immediate comment on aspects of a task which results in more specific comments; informal conversations away from the job; formal roles such as that of a mentor; and through the appraisal process, a more formal yet infrequent process.

### **APPROACHES TO EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK**

The feedback literature provides much discussion on the various types of feedback and the elements of effective feedback. Bing-You and Paterson (1997) suggest that peer-to-peer comparison is considered effective feedback by the participants in their study of internal medicine residents' perception of effective feedback. However, what are some of the effective tools that could be used by academics to provide effective feedback? If available, this information is not provided in one source that could be accessed by individuals interested in providing timely and effective feedback.

Weaver (2006) suggests that some academics appear to lack the knowledge on how to provide effective feedback. As winners of the Outstanding Teacher Award at our university, we believe that this award provides us with the sender credibility recommended by Bing-You and Patterson (1997).

The goal of this paper is to provide the academic community with feedback tools to improve teacher-student interaction and provide students with effective feedback thus improving the student learning process. The feedback tools are organized around the themes of teacher-to-student feedback, student-to-student (or peer-to-peer) feedback, and student-to-teacher feedback.

#### **Teacher-to-Student Feedback**

The teacher to student feedback is perhaps the most recognizable and traditional form of feedback. It is often expressed in the form of a grade at the end of an assignment and at the end of a course. However, the use of grades as the primary feedback tool often provides very little

useful information about students’ mastery of the course material. We support Carless’ (2006) view of using feedback for improvement and have adopted it in our teacher-student interactions. The teacher to student feedback methods used by us are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in this section.

Table 1: Teacher-to-Student Feedback Methods

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The “daily agenda”</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate and clear instructions for all assignments</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prompt and detail review of exams/assignments</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of incomplete (work in progress) assignments</li> </ul>

**The Daily Agenda**

Instructors begin each class period with a list of items that will be covering. The instructor refers to the list throughout the class period even though its content is not often shared with students. We believe that the ‘daily agenda’ (see below) is a more formal tool that could be utilized by instructors as part of the teacher-student feedback loop.

**Agenda – 3/20**

- Questions/Feedback from last class period
- Assignments due
  - Peach Blossom - Assignment #3 (today)
  - Peach Blossom - Assignments 4-6 (4/8)
    - Project #3 (10 points)
    - P8.51 - Kaplan Simulation – due on 3/25
- Next Exam - Exam #5 (3/27)
- Today’s Lecture
  - Chapter 8 – complete
  - Chapter 9 – start if time permits
- Summary and Feedback from today’s class

The daily agenda is an outline of the class discussion for a particular day, which includes any student assignments that are due, exam dates, and topics covered that day. It also provides students with the opportunity to share any comments or questions (this item will be discussed further in the student-to-teacher feedback) about the course or on a specific topic. The daily agenda is shared with students at the beginning of a class period and is also stored on a computer file accessible by students. A secondary benefit is that students can determine what was covered in class if they were unable to attend.

### **Appropriate and Clear Instructions**

We use a number of other simple methods to provide continuous and timely feedback to students to improve the learning process. For instance, we ensure that students are provided with appropriate and clear instructions for all assignments. We provide this information in a number of different places including our syllabi and/or on our individual web pages. Instructors can also use course management systems such as WebCT, to clarify instructions for assignments to students.

### **Prompt and Detail Review of Exams/Assignments**

Another area that is often overlooked by instructors is to review exams and assignments thoroughly with students. We created our own benchmark of returning all exams and assignments in the class period following the exam or due dates. As part of this process, we review the exams and assignments thoroughly with students in class. We solicit any general comments from students and recommend that they meet with us during office hours to discuss any individual issues. Students appreciate receiving prompt and detailed feedback which helps them to better understand the course material and perform better on subsequent exams and assignments. This supports Estep (2004) since feedback is provided as close to the behavior as possible.

### **Review of Incomplete Assignments**

Finally, students are typically given assignments that the instructor reviews and provides feedback on completion. While time consuming, we believe in providing feedback to students on work in process. Therefore, we meet with students while an assignment is in progress and provide guidance on the assignment without providing actual solutions. As an example, students in the external auditing course are assigned to groups and each group completes an audit simulation involving approximately eight individual projects ranging from audit planning to report writing. This 'continuous' feedback approach encourages students to incorporate feedback received into assignments which helps in the learning process.

As noted in the syllabus, each group's liaison is required to meet with the instructor prior to submitting the individual project for grading. Points are deducted if the group fails to accomplish this task. Although this approach seems like judging or punishing, which is not supported by Catt, Miller & SchallenKamp (2007), we believe it is more in-line with the helpful, constructive approach of Reese-Durham (2005). The meeting between the instructor and liaison is important since students are provided with valuable comments and suggestions for improvement on the work in progress and the instructor is able to answer specific questions on the project. This teacher-student feedback allows students to obtain a better understanding of the audit process and improve their overall learning experience. This process can be replicated in any course that requires students to complete individual or group projects.

### **Student to Student Feedback**

Formal and informal peer evaluations and benchmarking are the primary student to student feedback methods discuss in this section. As noted earlier in the paper, upper level accounting courses generally include a group project in which students are either assigned to groups or self select their group members. These group projects are often assigned to provide a

collaborative learning experience for students (Donmeyer, 2006). We use group projects in our cost accounting, government and nonprofit accounting, and auditing courses. The groups are comprised of two to five members and vary per semester depending on the course enrollment. Students work together outside of class and determine the process they will use to review the assignment as well as develop solutions to the group assignment.

### **Peer Evaluations**

During the group interactions, students provide informal feedback to each other on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Students are asked to complete a peer evaluation form on each individual team member's contribution to the project. This assists the instructor in determining individual project grades for the assignment. Chen & Lou (2004) found that students' perceive determining peers' grades as the most attractive outcome of using peer evaluations.

We provide students with the peer evaluation form either in the syllabi or prior to the start of the project. We use a relatively short form for this assessment process, since students will complete shorter forms more conscientiously (Ohland, et al, 2005). We also ask students to complete the peer evaluation forms outside of the classroom setting. In addition to points earned on the project, students are asked to provide written comments on the individual group member's contribution to the project. We share this information with students as necessary to provide them with feedback from their fellow group members, while protecting student anonymity.

### **Benchmarking**

Students are often uncertain about instructor expectations on individual assignments or group projects. We found that providing students with the "best" assignment for use as a benchmark is an effective means of enhancing the learning process. For instance, upon request, students in the external auditing course are provided with the highest graded group assignment from previous semesters for use as a guide. The assignments are reviewed in the instructor's office and students are not allowed to remove them. However, students can review the projects as often as necessary to obtain an understanding of what constitutes an excellent assignment. This approach supports Bing-You & Paterson (1997) since students are provided a benchmark and given the opportunity to compare themselves to their peers.

The above feedback tools can be replicated in any course that requires students to complete group assignments.

### **Student to Teacher Feedback**

The typical instrument used to provide student to teacher feedback, especially on teaching effectiveness, is the course evaluation form. This form is generally administered towards the end of the semester. The results from the course evaluation form are fed into the evaluation system at the typical university and affects merit increases, promotion, and tenure decisions. One shortfall of using the course evaluation form as the primary feedback mechanism is that the questions are often subjective and teaching deficiencies are identified too late in the semester. Such feedback, which occurs at the end of the semester or term, is not useful since it cannot be used to improve subsequent performance (Lattuca, 2005).

### **The Daily Agenda**

What if students could provide feedback to teachers on a timely basis so that the instructor could respond accordingly? The daily agenda discussed earlier and depicted in Figure 4 is one way of soliciting timely feedback from students. In addition to the items mentioned earlier, the daily agenda begins with a summary of topics covered in the last class period and ends with a summary of current class period's discussions. Students are encouraged to ask questions on topics that were not clear and provide feedback on any other issue. This student to teacher interaction occurs each class period and enables the instructor to clarify any topic or issue that needs further explanation, on a timely basis.

### **The "2 Minute Exercise"**

Another student to teacher feedback that we use is the "2 Minute Exercise". The purpose is to solicit constructive comments from students on ways in which an instructor could improve student understanding of the course material. The exercise is completed in class after a specific class period, and students are given the option to respond anonymously. This provides students with the opportunity to provide anonymous comments if they are concerned about any negative response to their comments from us. We found that the "2 Minute Exercise" provides us with another timely means of obtaining students' constructive and timely comments instead of waiting until the end of the semester. We respond to students comments immediately thus improving their learning experience.

## **CONCLUSION**

Feedback is an important ingredient in the student learning process. However, feedback providers may not have the tools necessary to provide timely and effective feedback. This paper identifies effective feedback tools that are available to the various senders in the feedback loop in order to address these deficiencies. These tools should help reduce the anxiety experienced by receivers since they will experience a balanced feedback process. We believe that the teacher to student, student to student, and student to teacher feedback approaches are all effective formal and informal feedback tools that can be employed by instructors in any course, to improve the student learning process.

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