

Giving Students More Effective Feedback

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Do you pass back exams, a set of papers or grades on some other student project and offer generic comments on what the class did and didn't do well on the assignment? Most of us do, and for good reasons. The feedback gives students the chance to compare their work with that done by the rest of class, which can build more accurate self-assessment skills.

The process is also a way of developing community within the class. You identify problem areas and the class can work together to improve. This makes it easier for students to help each other, share progress and celebrate success. It can also motivate individual improvement—a student might not feel so hopeless when he or she knows others are working on the same problem.

But do students listen attentively as you provide this feedback? Mine never did. I've been thinking about some ways we might enhance the impact of this feedback.

Offer feedback that is specific, concrete and limited. Make three (not 13) observations: 1. "Most of you did not support your views with examples and evidence from the reading." 2. "Most of you did correctly apply the concept of cognitive dissonance." 3. "I found proofreading errors on every paper." Maybe these comments could appear on a PowerPoint slide or on the board. If you make fewer points, you can reinforce their importance.

Offer examples that are right or well done. "Most of you didn't support your views with examples and evidence but a few people did and I'd like to read a paragraph that illustrates what I'm talking about here." I recommend anonymous examples. Holding up a student as an exemplar can cause discomfort and make others think "teacher's pet."

Give students time to benchmark their work against the criteria. "Are you one of the many who did not fully explain your methodology in section two of the lab report?" Have students take a look at their work and then write you a short note that discusses whether they met the criteria and offers an example to support their view. You can make recording their grade contingent on their return of the assignment with this note.

Target one (maybe more) area of improvement as the class goal for the next assignment. If there is general improvement, reward the class; a few bonus points, candy or granola bars, effusive teacher praise, etc. The key here is the regular reminders about the target area and discussion of how to accomplish the desired improvement.

Model how to fix a problem area. If it's a problem, work it out for students, but do more than generate the solution. Talk through the process. With problem paragraphs, for example, do more than just discuss why a sentence is problematic. Let them see how you would fix it.

Give students the chance to practice what you have just demonstrated. "Okay, I fixed that problem. Here's another one very much like it for you to try." Distribute a problem paragraph and give students five minutes to make it better. If you're in a writing lab and they make their edits online, you can go through a couple of examples with the whole class.

Target process issues for improvement as well. Sometimes it's not just the product that needs to be improved, it's the process. Propose a different process or let students develop one—for working problem sets, meeting deadlines, reviewing class notes, preparing for reading quizzes, for example—and challenge the class to try that process to see whether it improves results.

Encourage students to help each other with problem areas. If the focus here is on feedback given to a class, then give students some opportunities to work on it as a class. Then two days before the due date, remind students of the targeted improvement area, put them in small groups and give the group a paragraph to fix, or a problem to do. You could let the groups exchange their work and offer each other feedback. If you don't want to take class time, design this as an online opportunity.