

Chapter 11

Effective Feedback in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the effective use of feedback in online learning. Feedback is an essential component of learning. Faculty and instructors spend hours providing feedback, which is often not used to maximum benefit by the learners. Feedback, related assessment, evaluation and grades, is the comments provided to learners on their work. Guidelines for providing quality feedback are discussed. Types of feedback suitable for a range of contexts are presented. Techniques and technologies that enable detailed feedback to be delivered quickly to learners are discussed. With a little practice, using the methods discussed can reduce the amount of time spent on providing feedback, reduce learner wait time and increase the learner use of the feedback, all desirable outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

We receive and give feedback daily in our body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and choice of words. The feedback we receive can set the tone for our day, or our like or dislike of a person, place, or topic. When we receive feedback that is meaningful and presented in a pleasant manner, we are more likely to accept it, and enjoy our experience.

Imagine you have just given a presentation of your recent work in an online environment. If you do not get feedback from the audience: questions;

smiley face; virtual applause; or similar feedback; you have no idea if anyone is interested, agrees, disagrees, or what they are thinking. Is this much different than an online learner performing a task, demonstration, essay, presentation, etc., and not receiving feedback? How does this compare to just receiving a grade without comments?

A common concern of instructors and faculty is that hours are spent by them providing feedback, and learners just look at their mark and ignore the rest (Wiggins, 2012). These learners are often called “grade peepers” (Crane, 1995). Both assessment and feedback are important, they will

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impact instructor workloads; however technology can help alleviate the time required. Friesen (2009) suggests “learning something about these technologies, about their educational contextualization” (p. 39) so as to employ them best. Once an instructor is comfortable with various strategies and techniques suitable for online learning they can be used to reduce the grade peeping. Graves (2013) points out that learners are more likely to use helpful feedback on assignments that are nested or progressive. Williams (2013), who has worked in writing centers helping learners improve their writing, points out that often feedback is not very helpful;

I've seen countless examples on student writing that is vague, confusing and contradictory. Providing students with useful feedback is a difficult skill that TAs [teaching assistants] and less experienced instructors need to be taught. (p. 5)

Traditionally, feedback has been provided through oral, meta-verbal, or written communication. Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), provide many suitable options for feedback in online learning. The “appropriateness of a particular technology will depend on the context in which it is to be used” (Bates, 2008, p. 222). Many methods are suitable for feedback in multiple contexts and will be discussed in detail in this chapter:

1. Automated tutors;
2. Auto-scoring of assignments;
3. Self-checks;
4. Written comments;
5. Oral comments;
6. Meta-verbal;
7. Emoticons;
8. Peer feedback; and
9. Reflective networks (Anderson, 2008; Costello, 2009; Costello & Crane, 2009; Crane, 2010).

This chapter starts with a definition of e-feedback, followed by a brief discussion on assessment, and then an in-depth discussion of why, how to provide, and types of feedback. The chapter concludes with a discussion of various technologies and techniques for providing feedback for online learners.

DEFINING FEEDBACK

Feedback is not the grade on a paper (Wiggins, 2012). Feedback is the comments, questions, and information on how we are achieving our predetermined goal. Thus, feedback includes emoticons, facial expressions, language, tone, body language, gestures, and comments made during the learning process. As with any form of communication, there is a sender and a receiver, and both the instructor and learner can play both roles during the feedback process (Cantor, 2008).

Feedback, evaluation and grades may sometimes be confused, but they are three distinct, though related, terms. Feedback provides information to the learner about their work, what is good, and what and how to improve. It helps close the gap between the current knowledge or skill level and the desired level. Feedback should stimulate reflection, thought, learning, and improvement. In feedback there are no evaluative comments. Evaluation is an assessment of learner’s learning, i.e., what a learner achieves or demonstrates. A grade is the quantification of the evaluation.

Feedback and assessment go hand in hand. Learner-centered feedback is an essential component of quality assessment, which is part of the learning process. Quality feedback enables students to “progress with confidence and skill as lifelong learners” (HEFCE, 2010, p. 8), while enhancing motivation and self-esteem (Mohr, 2010). Feedback lets learners know what they do well, where and how they can improve, and what misconceptions they may have.

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