How to give (and not give) feedback

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Knowing that feedback is an integral part of learning and leveraging feedback as an integral part of learning are two very different things, especially for higher education instructors who have limited time and resources but an unlimited supply of students and assignments to assess.

At first, feedback for classrooms of students seems impossible, or at least, unreachable considering constraints on educators' time and energy. Evidence proves individually tailored feedback is best, but that means giving feedback to classrooms of students, each requiring a slightly different feedback delivered in a slightly different way.

Luckily, though, the process of giving feedback can be boiled down into a few different components: specificity, timing, and technique.

Focus on giving feedback that is specific

Feedback that is successful (improves or helps a learner develop, grow, change, learn) requires specificity to call attention to the exact problem or solution.

"Specific (or elaborated) feedback provides information about particular responses or behaviors beyond just their accuracy" (Shute, 2007).

Specificity takes on an even bigger role in higher education. Research papers, presentations, and group projects are just some of the higher education assignments that require more than just "correct" or "incorrect."

A close friend of mine had this experience. He, like many of his peers, enrolled in public speaking to fulfill his communication requirement. They had several class presentations. The feedback he got on my first presentation set the tone for the rest of the course. There was none.

Well, not exactly none. He got a grade. He said, "This told me I did well, but I didn't get 100%. I must've made some mistakes, right?"

You can understand his frustration: how could he improve on his performance if he had no way of knowing what he did right or wrong?

After reviewing the research, this is apparently not a singular experience: "The corrective function effects appear to be especially powerful for feedback that is more specific (Baron, 1988; Goldstein, Emanuel & Howell, 1968), which is described next"(Shute, 2007).

In fact, researchers tested general versus specific feedback and "found that the more specific feedback was clearly superior to general advice" (Shute, 2007).

Not only is specific feedback beneficial, but non-specific feedback can actually be harmful.

"Feedback lacking in specificity may cause students to view it as useless and/or frustrating (Williams, 1997). It can also lead to uncertainty about how to respond to the feedback (Fedor, 1991) and may require greater information processing activity on the part of the learner to understand the intended message (Bangert-Drowns et al, 1991). Uncertainty and cognitive load can lead to lower levels of learning (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Sweller et al., 1998), or even reduced motivation to respond to feedback(Ashford, 1986; Corno & Snow, 1986)" (Shute, 2007).

It's not just negative unspecific feedback that can be harmful. "Giving praise in a general or indiscriminate way may be unhelpful, and may even lead to lower self-esteem and loss of confidence" (Askew, 2000).

Specificity includes tailoring your message to the learner. "There is no such thing as a single 'magic bullet.' The 'magic' of the bullet is highly context dependent, and so the bullets must be fashioned according to local circumstances, the shooters and the targets. The university teacher . . . has to make 'intelligent choices in complex situations' . . . under ever-changing conditions, government reforms and revised curricula" (Evans, 2013).

Regardless of the method or timing of feedback, specificity has proven to be a key component to any kind of feedback.

"In short, [researchers] found that feedback specificity (low, moderate, and high levels) had a significant influence on performance for individuals who were low on learning orientation (i.e., high feedback specificity was better for learners with low learning orientation). They also reported a significant influence of feedback specificity on performance for persons high in performance orientation (i.e., this group also benefited from more specific feedback). The findings support the general positive effect of feedback on performance and further suggest the use of more specific feedback for learners with either high performance or low learning goal orientations"(Shute, 2007).

All about the timing

Getting the right timing for your feedback depends from learner to learner.

Which is tricky because knowing when to give your specific feedback is just about as important as how specific your feedback is.

Helen Keller once said, "It was my teacher's genius, her quick sympathy, her loving tact which made the first years of my education so beautiful. It was because she seized the

right moment to impart knowledge that made it so pleasant and acceptable to me" (Shute, 2007).

There are two approaches to feedback timing: either you give feedback immediately or you wait and give delayed feedback. Both offer advantages and are unique to the degree of a learner's skill or knowledge.

"Immediate feedback for students with low achievement levels in the context of either simple (lower level) or complex (higher level) tasks is superior to delayed feedback, while delayed feedback is suggested for students with high achievement levels, especially for complex tasks" (Shute, 2007).

In an experiment testing feedback intervals, researchers divided participants into four groups: those who would receive feedback after every trial, those after every five trials, after every ten trials, and after every fifteen trials. They found that "when feedback was present, all groups showed general improvements in performance across practice, although those in the longer length conditions showed worse performance relative to the shorter length conditions.

Those researchers concluded that "delayed feedback may be superior for promoting transfer of learning, especially in relation to concept formation tasks, while immediate feedback may be more efficient, particularly in the short

run and for procedural skills (i.e., programming and mathematics)" (Shute, 2007).

For just about twenty years, John R. Anderson and Albert T. Corbett conducted experiments in designing Advanced Computer Tutoring (ACT). They were studying how students reacted to computer tutoring in algebra, geometry, and LISP programming. The experiments attempted all kinds of variations, such as whether the computer tutor was presented to the student as a technological learning aid, or as a replacement for a human tutor.

One of the most consistent findings of their research was the benefit of immediate feedback. They studied the effect of feedback timing on their students. Similar to the above experiment, Anderson and Corbett divided students into 4 groups: those who would receive immediate feedback and "immediate error correction," those who'd only receive "immediate error-flagging," those who could request feedback, and those who received no support (Shute, 2007).

They found that the students in group A—the one with immediate feedback and correction—"yielded the most efficient learning . . . , completed the tutor problems fastest, and their performance on criterion tests was equivalent to that of the other groups" (Shute, 2007).

How not to give feedback

Specificity and timing aren't the only important considerations to keep in mind when giving feedback.

There is also an element of respect or concern that is expected of the educator because poorly delivered feedback or feedback meant to discourage can prove harmful to the learner.

Here are three things to avoid when giving feedback.

Avoid Negativity

Negative feedback demotivates, for example, by discouraging, being overly judgmental, critical, giving unclear or contradictory messages and encouraging dependence on others for assessing progress" (Askew, 2000).

Avoid thoughtless delivery

Pay attention to how your message gets there. Authors and researchers, Susan Askew and Caroline Lodge stated, "We have coined the phrase 'killer feedback' to describe situations when the receptive-transmission form of feedback blocks learning. [We both] have experience receiving such feedback on writing. The feedback was intended to be constructive and developmental, but its effect was to discourage all further redrafting. This was because there was too much and it felt overpowering, it did not connect with our thinking at the time, there was no

discussion or dialogue and it did not give any help in how to start making changes. It felt as if the person giving the feedback had their own purposes and goals for our writing" (Askew, 2000).

Avoid disrupting a student's flow

Don't interrupt a student who is focused and engaged. "Interrupting a student who is actively engaged in problem solving with feedback from an external source has too has been shown to inhibit learning (Corno & Snow, 1986)" (Shute, 2007).

Great feedback requires specificity and timeliness. The best feedback avoids negatively impacting the student. With your next assignment, consider your feedback strategy: do you have a way to give specific and timely feedback to your students? Then think historically: is your feedback effective in positively promoting student success, or have their been instances where students' efforts seemed unmotivated after receiving feedback?

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