

The Need for Balanced Feedback

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In the online class environment, students enjoy many advantages, such as increased scheduling flexibility, ability to balance work and school, classroom portability, and convenience. But there are potential shortcomings as well, including the lack of student-instructor interaction and a student not understanding the instructor's expectations. A key mechanism to convey expectations while increasing student-instructor communication is relevant, timely, constructive, and balanced instructor feedback.

What is balanced feedback? From my experience in numerous courses as a former online student and now as an online instructor, balanced feedback embodies two concepts. The first is balancing praise and critique. Seldom does a student submit an assignment that does not contain at least a few praiseworthy elements. By commending students, we show respect for their efforts and allow them to recognize the good aspects of their papers. On the other hand, students typically provide ample areas for instructors to provide specific correction and feedback. Pointing out errors or deficiencies without providing information that could prevent future repetitive errors does little to promote improvement. Critical feedback needs an element of precision and specificity. Here are a few examples how to make the feedback you give your students more balanced and instructive:

- Instead of "Writing style too informal" try feedback such as "You made an excellent point, yet consider in academic writing we strive to write in third person. Please avoid using personal pronouns such as I, we, or you."
- Instead of "No sources?" try "You nicely presented your opinion, however the

instructions required the use of three scholarly sources to support your statements.”

- Instead of “Incorrect citation” try “Thank you for citing the source of the quote, but remember to always include the page number of the excerpt.”

In addition, we need to consider our method for spotting areas that require feedback. For example, are you only scanning the paper looking for errors, or do you actively search for commendable elements? Certainly we need to point out the errors, yet offering praise when praise is due provides balance, takes the edge off of the included criticism, and keeps the lines of communication open. Think back to your worst teacher, the one that yelled or never had anything good to say. When confronted with that type of learning environment, the natural tendency is to withdraw, keep your distance, and never raise your hand to ask a question. I believe the same phenomenon exists in the online classroom, perhaps even more so.

Syntax vs. Content

The second concept regarding balanced feedback involves syntax/format versus topical content. Instructor feedback must address syntax and violations of the approved writing format and style guide, but it should also include topically-related comments. Otherwise, students might improve their spelling and grammar, yet continue to misunderstand the primary course concepts. With today’s technology regarding spell/grammar checks within writing software programs, I have become somewhat disillusioned at the incident rate of poor syntax. Students have little excuse for submitting work with simple errors, yet should syntax and format be the sole focus of my critique? If a student correctly, directly, and comprehensively addresses the assignment topic, yet does so with grammatical errors, there should be both reward and penalty. What about the student who writes a beautifully structured paper, free of all grammatical and formatting errors, yet fails to address the topic? The student deserves some positive feedback, yet must recognize that the content is underdeveloped, off topic, or inadequate.

The key to quality feedback is balance. If we drill our students only on grammar and structure, we miss the opportunity to improve the student’s grasp of the assignment topic. If all of our feedback heaps praise because we think negative critique is de-motivating and potentially humiliating, our students are likely to assume all is well. If we are inconsistent in or forgo penalizing poor syntax and format because the student obviously understands the course concept, we condone inappropriate work. If all the feedback is based on what is wrong with the paper instead of balanced with what is right, student frustrations and disdain for the instructor increases, and constructive student-instructor communication is likely to suffer. Balanced feedback allows us to properly do our job which is, or at least should be, creating a comfortable learning environment in which the student gains knowledge to be better prepared for the future.

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