Examining the Factors that Influence how Instructors Provide Feedback in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT
Feedback is considered to be the bridge between what has been learned and what the student should know. Feedback can correct misconceptions, motivate learners, stimulate deep thinking, and guide future behavior. However, in the online environment instructors must rely upon technologies to deliver feedback to students. To better understand the prompts and processes for online delivery of feedback, a descriptive study of higher education instructors who teach online was conducted to discover what events trigger instructor feedback and what tools the instructors choose to administer this feedback to online students. Results of the study revealed that the chosen feedback delivery mode and method are impacted by an instructor’s technology expertise, the class size, and audience composition and assessment type. The study revealed that instructors teaching online have transformed their pedagogy by purposively planning feedback methods into their course design and applying reflective methods into their teaching style.

Keywords: Distance Education, Feedback Delivery, Instructional Design, Instructor Feedback, Online Teaching

INTRODUCTION
Online education continues to gain acceptance by educators and students with approximately one out of every three college students enrolling in an online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Given the high demand for online learning, the importance of designing interactive student learning experiences is paramount. Online learning offers great flexibility to the student by its ubiquitous nature, but it also creates a communication hurdle between instructors and students since almost all interaction happens virtually. Instructors teaching online classes must often intuitively decide how to navigate the virtual classroom and find ways to effectively interact with students. Feedback is considered to be one of the most powerful activities that
enhance learning and engage students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mory, 1992; Kulhavy, 1977). However, when it comes to online learning, there is a lack of research describing what useful feedback looks like or how students want to receive this feedback (Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, & Edwards, 2009).

Meaningful feedback in an educational setting starts with a teacher who understands how individuals learn (Bruner, 1962). Within the instructional process, the teacher provides the student with activities and assessments tailored to the learning goals. The instructor then grades the student work and provides feedback designed to correct misconceptions, motivate the learner, and further develop the student’s knowledge (Walvoord & Anderson, 2010). Feedback becomes the bridge between what a student knows and what a student needs to know and is essential for knowledge building (Wiggins, 1997).

Although significant scholarly research discussing the importance of feedback already exists, the definition of what factors make feedback meaningful and effective remains largely unexplored in the literature (Anderson, Imdieke, & Standerford, 2011; Bruner, 1962; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kulhavy, 1977). Feedback consists of information about a learner’s performance fed back to the learner during an interaction with the expectation that the information will adjust student performance (Price, Handley, & O’Donovan, 2010). In online educational settings, Wolsey (2008) defines feedback as an instructor’s comments on and about student work. It is communication to the learner providing information about how accurately a task was performed (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Research has shown that instructor feedback helps students to validate their understanding of concepts and theories during the learning process (Bruner, 1962). It is communication between a learner and an instructor referencing an instructional question, which enhances learning (Kowitz & Smith, 1987).

Where the learning occurs influences how the instructor delivers the feedback (Shute, 2008). In face-to-face courses, instructors have quick access to students in the classroom and can provide feedback spontaneously depending upon the student questions and body language (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005). However, instructors in online environments do not have the luxury of physical cues but must transcend the virtual distance and deliver feedback using a variety of tools depending upon their technology knowledge and their purpose (Ice & Richardson, 2009).

In both face-to-face and online environments, and instructor feedback can correct a learner’s understanding of a particular topic (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), motivate the learner (Jones, 2010) or provide clarification and information about instructions (Liu, 2012). The difference between online and face-to-face feedback lies with the tools and delivery method (Thurmord & Wambach, 2004). Online feedback, termed e-feedback, is the information exchange between student and instructor regarding assignments and course activities in a virtual environment (Chang, 2011). This feedback will vary depending upon the student’s needs and available technology (Bonnel, 2011).

In a study of 50 graduate students taking an online course, students were surveyed to find out what elements of feedback are most effective for writing assignments. Results from the study revealed that feedback must be timely and directly related to the learning at the “moment” (Wolsey, 2008, p. 323). The research suggests that feedback has a key role in the learning process and is linked to motivating students to stay engaged (Zimmerman, 1994). Lack of feedback can contribute to potential problems of learner attrition, failure, or dissatisfaction (Dennen, Darabi & Smith, 2007).

Instructor-learner interaction creates community within the learning environment and enhances instructor presence (Moore & Kearsley, 2004). In order to strengthen the community, frequent engagement between instructors and students must occur (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Research suggests that in online learning environments the instructor has the greatest influence in stimulating active en-
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