Chapter 9

Student and Instructors Perceptions of Helpful Feedback for Asynchronous Online Learning:
What Students Want From Instructor Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Research into online courses suggests that instructor feedback is effective for student learning when the feedback is personalized, specific, and timely. However, even with the technical ability to receive feedback any time at any location through varied devices, students still report dissatisfaction with instructor feedback. This chapter describes a mixed-methods study examining instructor and student perceptions of feedback in asynchronous environments. The study’s results showed that students find personal and corrective feedback most helpful while instructors identified corrective and Socratic feedback as most helpful. Students characterized helpful feedback to be personalized, specific, and timely. Students also reported that grades were a form of feedback measuring stages of understanding but also an incentive for them to revise their work in order to achieve higher grades. The chapter includes strategies instructors can use for integrating each feedback type into their course design along with digital communication methods that enhance the student learning experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Student demand for online learning continues to soar with almost one out of three college students enrolled in at least one online course each semester (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Moreover, traditional face-to-face classes now incorporate online lessons and activities. This integration of online teaching into the mainstream educational process has reshaped the way teachers and students interact (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). Research shows that instructor feedback is a necessary ingredient for student learning: it is actionable information designed to help students meet an educational goal with the intent to bridge the gap between what students have understood and what students should have understood (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2010).

In the traditional face-to-face classrooms, a teacher delivers real-time, in-person feedback to students, either to the entire class or to individual students. However, when delivering feedback to students in online classes, especially asynchronous classes, creates challenges for an instructor due to the lack of visual, auditory and social cues. The asynchronous environment greatly limits the spontaneous conversation about performance between teacher and the student. This virtual divide often creates misunderstandings between student and instructor, increasing the chances that feedback may be interpreted in a manner not intended by the instructor. Such misinterpretation may discourage the student who, in response, develops a feeling of online isolation. Given these challenge of online learning, the role of feedback takes an even more essential role for successful learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kulhavy, 1977; Mory, 2003).

The teacher’s instructional process first provides students with activities tailored to the learning goals and with assessments to measure each student’s performance. The teacher then provides the students feedback to affirm or shift the students’ understanding of the specific learning goal. This feedback plays several different roles in the learning process and can be broken into distinct types, each with a unique purpose in helping the learner meet the educational goal (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Liu, 2012). For researchers evaluating feedback, two questions emerged:

1. What feedback types do instructors in asynchronous online classes perceive as most helpful for students’ learning?
2. What feedback types do students in asynchronous online classes perceive as most helpful for their learning?

This chapter will address these questions about what types of feedback students and instructors perceive as most helpful for students’ learning in the online learning environment and what feedback strategies instructors can incorporate in their pedagogy and course design process.

BACKGROUND

Scholarly literature establishes a clear connection between feedback and student learning even though the factors that make feedback meaningful and effective remain largely unexplored (Anderson, Imdieke, & Standerford, 2011; Bruner, 1962; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kulhavy, 1977). In practice, feedback provides learners with the opportunity to accept, modify, or reject prior knowledge; however, the acceptance of the feedback depends on several factors: the learner’s self-esteem, prior knowledge, personal beliefs, and motivations. The research affirms that feedback which does not threaten self-esteem is more
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