VOLUME 17 • ISSUE 5 • MAY 2019

THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

PROVIDING FEEDBACK: MAXIMIZE THE MESSAGE AND THE MEDIUM

Brad Garner
Director of Faculty Enrichment,
National & Global Campus
Indiana Wesleyan University
brad.garner@indwes.edu

Providing students feedback on their assignments represents an integral part of being an instructor. Unfortunately, higher education often reduces this step to assigning grades as a pathway to calculating a final grade. There is growing evidence, however, that providing effective feedback to students is key to teaching and learning (Bajaj, Kaur, Arora, & Singh, 2018; Bjorklund, Parente, & Sathianathan, 2013; Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008). It behooves instructors to reflect on how they provide feedback as they search for those strategies that will help students perform at their highest level. In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will explore best practices for crafting and delivering feedback to students.

First, the Message

Considering the actual content that students receive as feedback is chiefly important. Wiggins (2011) reminds instructors of the clear differences between praise, advice, and feedback:

> Loosely speaking, of course, feedback means anything we say back to a person who has said or done something. So, it is not uncommon to hear educators say that "Good job!" and "Try harder next time!" are examples of feedback. Yet, strictly speaking, neither is feedback: The first phrase is praise and the second phrase is advice. Feedback is information about what happened, in light of a goal; there is no praise, blame, or advice, just actionable data from some result. … There is a performance goal; we act on it; there is a result of some kind. That result, strictly speaking, is the feedback. (paras. 2-3)

Price, Handley, Millar, and O'Donovan (2010) suggest instructors aim for three outcomes when giving feedback: (a) providing exemplars for a great product (e.g., rubrics, class discussion, samples); (b) giving students information about their performance relative to expectations; and (c) offering ways to close this gap and improve their performance on future assignments. Beyond these mechanics,

> "When we make progress and get better at something, it is inherently motivating. In order for people to make progress, they have to get feedback and information on how they're doing."
>
> **— Daniel Pink,** ***author***

however, Percell (2017) suggests that certain affective elements help students process and implement recommended feedback:

- viewing feedback as formative (i.e., developmental);
- providing it in the context of a personal connection;
- maintaining an informal, conversational feel to feedback-related communication; and
- demonstrating a level of authenticity.

In summary, feedback is effective when students feel it is personalized and that the instructor providing it cares about helping improve their performance.

Faculty, then, in thinking about the feedback they deliver, should consider both the cognitive (e.g., specific points for improvement, objective assessment of quality) and affective (e.g., relational, personal) elements of what they share.

Reflective Questions to Consider:

1. Are students fully aware of the expectations for their assignments? How am I sharing those expectations?
2. At what level am I creating feedback channels that help students?
3. In reviewing my feedback practices, how would I feel if I received this feedback? Would it lead to improved performance the next time?

Next, the Medium

Beyond the message shared with students through feedback, it is important to consider different ways to deliver that content. Traditionally, faculty have relied on either a red pen or a track-changes tool (e.g., in Microsoft Word) to make comments on student papers. A study by Stern and Solomon (2006) revealed that text-based instructor feedback primarily focused on spelling, grammar, and word choice. Less likely to merit feedback were issues related to how students used supporting evidence, structured and organized their papers, and demonstrated creativity in their written output. More recently, instructors have begun using tools such as Grammarly and Turnitin that automatically provide feedback on spelling, grammar, formatting, and punctuation and are commonly embedded in learning management systems. How, then, might faculty raise their game in terms of providing deeper, more robust levels of feedback?

Giving feedback at a time when students can use it effectively for subsequent assignments is critically important. Cutler (2018) argues for the value of arranging one-to-one meetings with students to discuss their work and possible areas of improvement. In particular, one-to-one meetings ensure students hear feedback as it is intended. As Cutler notes:

> Many students can't distinguish negative feedback on a piece of work from what a teacher thinks about them as people. To address this concern, I strive to carve out some one-on-one time with each of my students. It's important for them to hear the caring tone of my voice as I summarize my comments. I'm also careful to provide positive feedback, which often gives students a boost of confidence. (paras. 5-6)

This strategy inherently requires a serious time commitment from instructors. As Fluckiger, Vigil, Pasco, and Danielson (2010) suggest, however, time invested in such meetings can

NEW RESOURCES ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

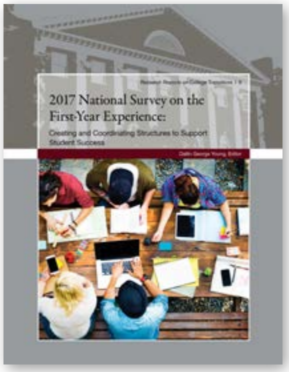
From Disability to Diversity: College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities, ADHD, and Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Lynne C. Shea, Linda Hecker, and Adam R. Lalor

Paperback
ISBN 978-1-942072-29-4
(2019) 144 pages. **$30.00**

Ebook
ISBN 978-1-942072-30-0
(2019) 144 pages. **$23.99**

Library Ebook
ISBN 978-1-942072-31-7
(2019) **$95.00**



2017 National Survey on the First-Year Experience: Creating and Coordinating Structures to Support Student Success

Edited by Dallin George Young
Paperback
ISBN 978-1-942072-32-4
(Available July 2019) 180 pages. **$25.00**

WWW.**NRCPUBS**.COM

greatly benefit the connection between instructors and students, while also improving students' performance.

A study by Orlando (2016) examined using audio feedback as an alternative or supplement to text-based evaluation. Faculty members using text-based feedback spent, on average, 13.43 minutes to provide an average of 129.75 words. With audio-based feedback, faculty spent, on average, 3.81 minutes and provided an average of 331.39 words. Additionally, when the mode was audio, faculty used five times as many adjectives as they did using text. For their part, students said they preferred audio because it offered a more personal and nuanced version of their instructors' recommendations for improvement. Students also showed a higher level of motivation to respond to audio.

Notably, many of the leading learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Brightspace, Canvas) have embedded tools for audio feedback. Using these, faculty can quickly and easily record an audio message for students as either their primary feedback or as a supplement to written comments.

As a final consideration, Orlando (2016) also examined video as a feedback tool. Interestingly, students were less convinced. While they affirmed the value of seeing and hearing their instructor as they processed feedback and felt that video better communicated what they described as "conceptual" issues in their papers, they also noted downsides. These included access (i.e., the common need to download videos) and the possibility of video feedback not being close-captioned, which could jeopardize institutions' compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Faculty should look for ways to deliver feedback that connect best with their own personal style and the learning needs of their students. Whether written, face-to-face, audio, or video, the key is to relate with students and demonstrate a personal interest in their learning. The stronger faculty's personal connection with students, the more likely those students will reflect on that feedback for future assignments. That is, after all, the purpose of feedback.

Reflective Questions to Consider:

1. What would my students say about their preferred way of receiving feedback?
2. Do I have the technical skills to add audio or video components to my feedback?

Feedback is a critical element of teaching and learning—consider the effectiveness of yours.

REFERENCES

Bajaj, J. K., Kaur, K., Arora, R., & Singh, S. J. (2018). Introduction of feedback for better learning. *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research.* doi:10.7860/jcdr/2018/36744.12402

Bjorklund, S. A., Parente, J. M., & Sathianathan, D. (2013). Effects of faculty interactions and feedback on gains in student skills. *Journal of Engineering Education, 93*(2), 153-160. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00799.x

Cutler, D. (2018, April 10). *Crafting feedback that leads to learning*. Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/article/crafting-feedback-leads-learning

Fluckiger, J., Vigil, Y. T., Pasco, R., & Danielson, K. (2010). Formative feedback: Involving students as partners in assessment to enhance learning. *College Teaching, 58*(4), 136-140. doi:10.1080/87567555.2010.484031

Orlando, J. (2016, July). A comparison of text, voice, and screencasting feedback to online students. *American Journal of Distance Education, 30*(3), 156-166. doi:10.1080/08923647.2016.1187472

Percell, J. C. (2017). Lessons from alternative grading: Essential qualities of teacher feedback. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 90*(4), 111-115. doi:10.1080/00098655.2017.1304067

Perera, J., Lee, N., Win, K., Perera, J., & Wijesuriya, L. (2008). Formative feedback to students: The mismatch between faculty perceptions and student expectations. *Medical Teacher, 30*(4), 395-399. doi:10.1080/01421590801949966

Price, M., Handley, K., Millar, J., & O'Donovan, B. (2010). Feedback: All that effort, but what is the effect? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(3), 277-289. doi:10.1080/02602930903541007

Stern, L. A., & Solomon, A. (2006). Effective faculty feedback: The road less traveled. *Assessing Writing, 11*(1), 22-41. doi:10.1016/j.asw.2005.12.001

Wiggins, G. (2011, September 15). *Feedback: What it is and isn't*. Retrieved from https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2011/09/15/feedback-what-it-is-and-isnt/

Submission Guidelines for *The Toolbox*

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/

Audience: *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.

Length: Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

You can also submit your article online by using our submission form.

Please address all questions and submissions to:

Brad Garner, Toolbox Editor
Indiana Wesleyan University
1900 West 50th Street
Marion, IN 46953
Email: brad.garner@indwes.edu
Phone: 765-677-3341

About *The Toolbox*

The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

Publication Staff

Founding Editor: Brad Garner

Editor: Todd Money

Graphic Designer: Stephanie L. McFerrin

Assistant Director for Publications: Tracy L. Skipper