Improving Written Feedback

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Providing Constructive Written Feedback

Written communications are central to learning and teaching in an online asynchronous environment like Moodle. An effective distance education instructor can engage and even empower students through constructive commentary on their work. Meaningful comments help students understand that grades are not a measure of their intelligence but of the quality of a specific assignment. Here are some general guidelines for formulating written feedback on assignments and activities:

- Respond like a reader – not a grader
- Use “I” terms. For example: “I got lost here.” “I’m confused – did you mean to say...?”
- Structure your comments as questions or suggestions.
- Explain your comments (i.e., don’t just include a checkmark, or say “needs work” or “good.”) Avoid making comments so general and vague that they become meaningless.
- Tell the student what they did well and why, as well as where they went wrong and why.
- Point out and explain irrelevant or missing content.
- Give students examples of how to reword awkward or confusing statements (rather than just saying “This is confusing” or “This could be better expressed.”)
- Don’t overwhelm students with too much feedback. Too much feedback can be discouraging and difficult for students to digest.
- Be clear about which issues are minor (and easily corrected) and which are major (requiring more thought and work from the students to address).
- When summarizing comments, start and end with the positive. Find a balance between being encouraging (but not too encouraging) and being critical (but not too negative).
- Tell the student what they need to do to improve in the future.
Test Yourself: What does constructive written feedback look like?

Which comment(s) would you say meet the guidelines set out above?

- Omit paragraph
- You might want to consider omitting this paragraph
- I wonder what you gain by including this paragraph here

Which comment(s) would you say meet the guidelines set out above?

- These arguments are not convincing
- Explain why this is the case
- I find this statement less than convincing
- Your point might be clearer if you state, point by point, the author’s view, as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of his arguments and show the weakness in his position.

Which comment(s) would you say meet the guidelines set out above?

- Have you proved your point by merely asserting this?
- What is it you most want me to know about your position on this case?
- In this professional education course, the trick is to express your opinion about the assigned topic with authority.

Feedback as Dialogue

Constructive feedback on students’ discussion postings and assignments becomes, as Morgan and O’Reilly* (1999) point out, “a critical point for dialogue between teachers and learners”. This excerpt from Morgan and O’Reilly’s book Assessing Open and Distance Education offers suggestions about how to teach through constructive feedback.

... Speaking from our own experiences as distance learners, poor or minimal feedback from assignments – those things that we’d put so much effort into – was one of the most frustrating aspects of being a distance education students. There’s nothing more demotivating than putting a good deal of effort into an assignment, only to receive an abbreviated comment like ‘good work’. How was it good? How could it have been better? One rightly questions whether the marker has engaged at all, or just skimmed through the paper to find some key words to tick.

Rowntree (1990:328)* makes the following suggestions to improved written feedback on assignments:

- Draw the learner’s attention to facts they have overlooked or misinterpreted.
- Suggest alternative approaches or interpretations.
- Suggest new sources (e.g. other people) from who learners might get feedback.
• Draw attention to gaps in the learner’s reasoning.
• Suggest how learners might present their ideas more effectively.
• Offer comments that will help learners sharpen their practical skills.
• Ask for further explanation of muddled answers.
• Demonstrate useful short-cuts in procedures.
• Help learners reflect on how a piece of work might have been improved.
• Point out relationships between the learners’ present work and their earlier work.
• Commend the learners for any unexpected insights, special efforts or improvement in competence.

If you heed Rowntree’s advice as above, then you are doing three important things:
• You are teaching rather than simply ‘marking’.
• You are entering into a dialogue with learners rather than simply communicating their results.
• You are encouraging learners to reflect upon and evaluate their own achievement, rather than relying on you as the sole arbiter.

These issues are important in open and distance learning (ODL), as your comments may be the most significant – or perhaps the only – interactions you have with learners. From our own experiences we might add a few more to Rowntree’s list:
• Engage with learners’ arguments or points of view – are they persuasive? Are they sufficiently supported?
• It is just as important to give detailed feedback to those doing well as for those who are struggling.