Providing Feedback on Assignments and Activities

Online distance students need constructive feedback comments that are clear, consistent and focused on the issues that you think are most important for them to consider.

Why do students need feedback?

- To encourage them and build their confidence by letting them know what they’re doing well.
- To support them in diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses.
- To keep them on track so they meet the course goals and unit objectives.
- To help them improve future performance. Feedback should be constructive and not subjective, specific and clear, and about something students can change for their future work.

When do I need to give feedback?

- Feedback should be as timely as possible. Don’t wait until the end of the semester to give feedback on discussion and assignments.
- It is vital that you provide feedback to students before their next assignment is due so that they have time to digest your feedback and integrate it into the next assignment.

How to provide feedback to online distance students

- Individually (using the assignments tool or embedding comments in a document)
- To a group (using the discussion forums)
- Using audio comments (embedding audio in a document)

Considerations when providing feedback

- Phrase your comments as statements, not as questions, and avoid making comments so general and vague that they become meaningless.
- Explain your comments (i.e., don’t just include a checkmark, or say “needs work” or “good.”)
- 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.

(Adapted from “Providing individual written feedback on formative and summative assessments”, Keren Bright, Open University. Retrieved from the Internet August 30, 2010 from http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/assessment/effectivefeedback.html.)

Here are some comments on using technology to provide feedback from “How to Give Effective Feedback on Student Writing Assignments” in Faculty Focus: (http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/how-to-give-effective-feedback-on-student-writing-assignments/)

How often does this happen to you? You pore over students’ writing assignments, adding what you feel are insightful and encouraging comments throughout each paper. Comments you hope your students will take to heart and use to improve their writing next time around. Then you return the papers and the students quickly look at the grade and stuff the paper into their backpacks ... perhaps mumbling something under their breath as they do.

This same scenario plays out with each subsequent writing assignment, and each side gets more frustrated. The instructor can’t understand why he sees the same types of mistakes over and over again, and the students resign themselves to the fact that “I’m just not a good writer.”

In Providing Feedback in a Technology-Mediated Environment, Cleveland State University’s William Beasley, EdD. and Brian Harper, PhD. outlined a two-pronged approach for breaking this cycle.

Part one requires adopting a method of communication that pays attention to what is being said as well as how it’s said, Harper explains, while noting that “feedback has the power to engage or disengage students in the writing process.”
For example, the instructor should focus initial comments on what student does well, and then build from there to develop other skills. To make feedback more meaningful, it’s also important to chip away at that the widely held notion that good writers are born not made.

“In short, the content of the feedback should communicate that you care about the student, that the student is capable of being successful as a writer, and that you are willing to help map a path to that success,” says Harper.

The second part of the student feedback model involves using technology to help streamline the feedback process. During the seminar Beasley demonstrated how to use “track changes” to highlight simple errors such as misspelled words, poor grammar, and punctuation errors that require minimal commentary. For more detailed feedback, Beasley showed how to use the “insert comment” feature. Finally, on more “macro-level” content errors, Beasley provided a quick tutorial on how to embed a brief audio clip that gives more detailed guidance to the student on ways to improve the paper.

A word of caution, when using “track changes” or “insert comments” Beasley recommends converting the Word document to a PDF so that students can’t simply click “accept changes” and resubmit the paper without actually doing any of the rewriting themselves.