

Revisiting feedback to learner writing

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In this article, Bulara provides an outline of different strategies to be found in the literature about providing feedback to learners on their writing. We suggest that teachers / subject departments scan it and extract useful tips for their own practice.

One of the major points emphasised in the Curriculum, Assessment and Policy Statement is the **process stages** in reading, listening and writing skills. The success and progress of each stage depends on how effective the feedback given is to the 'producer', the learner in this case.

With the national outcry on poor reading and writing, it is worthwhile to dust all the literature available on feedback strategies. The focus in this article is on writing.

The process of writing is defined, by various researchers, as a slow, dynamic and recursive process which is continuous (Gay, 1992; Perl, 1994). The process consists of a cycle of re-seeing, re-creating and re-formulating one's writing task in order to clarify and structure one's thinking. This process

requires, thus, a view which defines writing as an ongoing process, a text that may be improved on at every point of contact.

Although researchers do not agree on the value and effect of feedback on learners' writing, teachers and learners alike believe that feedback on learners' writing will help them (learners) to improve their writing. Various feedback strategies are used by teachers with the intention of giving learners guidance and cues on how to improve their writing. This view is also held by a number of researchers who agree that feedback is central to the process of teaching and learning to write (Dheram, 1995; Tchudi, 1997; Hyland, 1990; Muncie, 2000).

Despite the disagreement among researchers, the demands set by CAPS on English teachers do not make feedback an option, but a must for all teachers. Further attention should be given to how effective the feedback can be.

(1) Providing Feedback in a Technology-Mediated Environment

In this programme, Cleveland State University's William Beasley and Brian Harper outline a two-pronged model for providing feedback. According to Harper, 'feedback has the power to engage or disengage students in the writing process'. They advocate a two-stage approach to feedback.

Part one requires adopting a method of communication that pays attention to *what* is being said as well as *how* it's said. For example, the instructor should focus initial comments on what the student does well, and then build from there to develop other writing skills. To make feedback more meaningful, it's also important to chip away at 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.

(2) One-on-One Writing Conferences with students

[Source: J.C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Jossey-Bass, 2001]

Tips

- Have an agenda in mind before starting the conference. The agenda and the higher-order and lower order questions (below) can serve as a guide. Finish one step/question before moving to the next.
- Encourage the student to do most of the talking.
- have students rehearse and explain what they want to say (I'll often take dictation and give the student my notes to take home) or have students describe where they are stuck

Suggested agenda for the conference

1. Ask the student to summarize the assignment in their own words, and pose the following questions:

a) What do you expect from the conference?

b) How much work have you put into the draft? How much more time are you willing to put into the paper?

c) Write down your thesis (or purpose, hypothesis) and supporting points; then write down the main problems you see with the draft [Instructor can

read/skim the draft while the student writes].

Note: Adjust (c) as needed, depending on the assignment.

Examples:

– If it's a lab report, the student can write the hypothesis, primary result, and summarize the points for the discussion.

– If it's a memo, student can write the purpose of the memo, intended effect on the reader, and the main points.

2. Give the student positive reinforcement: 'I really like _____' or 'You do a good job _____.'

3. Give the student an honest evaluation of the draft. Be specific.

4. Reassure the student that shortcomings and problems in a draft are a normal part of the writing process.

5. Use your personal experiences whenever possible.

6. Collaborate with the student to develop a list of 2-3 things the student should work on. Start with higher-order concerns first.

7. Jot down the agreed-upon areas so the student has a list to take home. Ask the student to describe to you what he/she plans to do to work on the 2-3 things.

Questions to guide commenting

Higher-order concerns

1. Does the draft follow the assignment?
2. Does the draft addresses an appropriate problem or question?
3. What is the quality of the argument (or quality of the ideas presented)?
4. Is the draft organized at the macro level?
5. Is the draft organized at the micro level?

Lower-order concerns

6. Are there stylistic problems that you find particularly annoying?
7. Is the draft free of errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation?
8. Does the draft follow style guide rules for citations (if library or external data sources are used)?

(3) Tips for Commenting on Student Writing

Teachers who require their students to write papers dedicate many hours each semester to reading, commenting on, and

grading student writing, and they often wonder if the time they have spent translates into improvements in their students' writing skills. For their part, students want constructive feedback on their writing and often express frustration when they find their instructors' comments on their papers to be mysterious, confusing, or simply too brief.

The following tips can help you improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which you respond to your students' writing. These tips focus on the process of writing comments on students' papers (whether on rough drafts or final drafts), rather than on the process of grading papers. Grading and commenting on papers are certainly interconnected processes. However, while instructors often think of writing comments on papers as simply a means to justify grades, that purpose should be secondary to helping your students improve their writing skills.

A .Course Planning

Before the writing course / programme begins, think about what kind of writing you will assign, and how you will respond to that writing.

1) Design each writing assignment so that it has a clear purpose connected to the learning objectives for the course.

Craft each assignment as an opportunity for students to practice and master writing skills that are central to their success in the course and to academic achievement in your discipline. For example, if you want them to learn how to summarize and respond to primary literature or to present and support an argument, design assignments that explicitly require the skills that are necessary to accomplish these objectives.

2) Sequence your writing assignments to help students acquire skills incrementally, beginning with shorter, simpler writing assignments to longer, more complex papers. You might also

find it helpful to develop a sequence for writing comments. In other words, decide ahead of time which aspects of the writing you will focus on with each assignment. For example, you may decide to focus your comments on the first assignment on the writing of the thesis statement, then focus comments on later papers on the success with which the students deal with counter-arguments. Sequencing your comments can help make the commenting process more efficient. However, it is essential to communicate to students before they turn in their papers which aspects of the writing you are going to focus on in your feedback at which points in the semester (and why).

3) Develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each writing assignment.

These criteria will help you be as consistent and fair as possible when evaluating a group of student papers. Developing and using criteria is especially important when co-teaching a course or when asking TAs to grade papers for the course. Distribute the grading criteria to students (or post the criteria on the course website) so that they will know how you will evaluate their work.

While there are shared criteria for 'good writing' that apply across academic disciplines, each discipline also has certain standards and conventions that shape writing in the discipline. Do not expect that students will come into your class knowing how to write the kind of paper you will ask them to write. For example, a student who has learned how to write an excellent analytical paper in a literature course may not know how to write the kind of paper that is typically required for a history course. Give students a written list of discipline-specific standards and conventions, and explain these in class. Provide examples of the kind of writing they will need to produce in your course.

4) Develop a process for writing comments that will give students a clear idea of whether they have or have not achieved the course's learning objectives (and with what

degree of success).

Students should be able to see a clear correlation among 1) written comments on a paper, 2) the grading criteria for the assignment, and 3) the learning objectives for the course. Thus, before you start reading and commenting on a stack of papers, remind yourself of the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and which aspects of the writing you want to focus on in your response.

B. Writing comments in the margins

1) The first time you read through a paper, try to hold off on writing comments.

Instead, take the time to read the paper in its entirety. If you need to take some notes, do so on another piece of paper. This strategy will prevent you from making over-hasty judgments, such as faulting a student for omitting evidence that actually appears later in the paper. (In such cases, it may be appropriate to tell the student that you expected that evidence to be presented earlier – and the reason why.) While you may expect this strategy to take more time, it can actually save you time by allowing you to focus your feedback on the most important strengths and weaknesses you want to bring to the writers' attention (see 'Writing Final Comments,' below).

2) Respond as a reader, not as a writer.

Do not tell students how YOU would write the paper. Instead, tell them how you are responding to each part of the paper as you read it, pointing out gaps in logic or support and noting confusing language where it occurs. For example, if a sentence jumps abruptly to a new topic, do not rewrite the sentence to provide a clear transition or tell the student how to rewrite it. Instead, simply write a note in the margin to indicate the problem, then prompt the student to come up with a solution.

This strategy is especially important to follow when a student asks you to respond to a draft before the final paper is due;

in this case, your aim should be to help the student identify weaknesses that he or she should improve and NOT to do the student's thinking and writing for them. Of course, in some instances, it is necessary and appropriate to give the student explicit directions, such as when she or he seems to have missed something important about the assignment, misread a source, left out an essential piece of evidence, or failed to cite a source correctly.

3) Ask questions to help students revise and improve.

One way to ensure that your comments are not overly directive is to write *questions* in the margins, rather than instructions. For the most part, these questions should be 'open' rather than 'closed' (having only one correct answer.) Open questions can be a very effective way to prompt students to think more deeply about the topic, to provide needed evidence, or to clarify language

4) Resist the temptation to edit.

Instead, mark a few examples of repeated errors and direct students to attend to those errors. Simply put, if you correct your students' writing at the sentence level, they will not learn how to do so themselves, and you will continue to see the same errors in paper after paper. Moreover, when you mark all mechanical errors, you may overwhelm your students with so many marks that they will have trouble determining what to focus on when writing the next draft or paper.

5) Be specific.

Comments in the margin such as 'vague,' 'confusing,' and 'good' do not help students improve their writing. In fact, many students find these comments 'vague' and 'confusing'—and sometimes abrupt or harsh. Taking a little more time to write longer, and perhaps fewer, comments in the margin will help you identify for students exactly what they have done well or poorly. Information about both is crucial for helping them improve their writing.

Here are some examples of specific comments:

Rather than 'vague':

- *'Which research finding are you referring to here?'*
- *'I don't understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?'*
- *'Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?'*

Instead of 'confusing,' 'what?' or '???:'

- *'I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?'*
- *'You imply that this point supports your argument, but it actually contradicts your point in paragraph 3.'*

Rather than 'good':

- *'This excellent example moves your argument forward.'*
- *'Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing.'*
- *'An apt metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical metaphor.'*

3. Writing Final Comments

1) Begin by making positive comments; when pointing out weaknesses, use a descriptive tone, rather than one that conveys disappointment or frustration.

Give an honest assessment, but do not overwhelm the writer with an overly harsh or negative reaction. For example, do not assume or suggest that if a paper is not well written, the writer did not devote a lot of time to the assignment. The writer may have in fact struggled through several drafts. Keep in mind that confusing language or a lack of organized

paragraphs may be evidence not of a lack of effort, but rather of confused thinking. The writer may therefore benefit from a few, targeted questions or comments that help them clarify their thinking.

2) Limit your comments; do not try to cover everything.

Focus on the 3-4 most important aspects of the paper. Provide a brief summary of 1) what you understood from the paper and 2) any difficulties you encountered. Make sure that whatever you write addresses the grading criteria for the assignment, but also try to tailor your comments to the specific strengths and weaknesses shown by the individual student.

While you may think that writing lots of comments will convey your interest in helping the student improve, students—like all writers—can be overwhelmed by copious written comments on their work. They may therefore have trouble absorbing all the comments you have written, let alone trying to use those comments to improve their writing on the next draft or paper.

3) Distinguish ‘higher-order’ from ‘lower-order’ issues.

Typically, ‘higher-order’ concerns include such aspects as the thesis and major supporting points, while ‘lower-order’ concerns are grammatical or mechanical aspects of the writing. Whatever you see as ‘higher’ in importance than other aspects should be clear in your grading criteria. Whatever you decide, write your comments in a way that will help students know which aspects of their writing they should focus on FIRST as they revise a paper or write the next paper. For example, if a paper lacks an argument or a main point in an assignment in which either an argument or main point is essential (as is usually the case), address that issue first in your comments before you note any grammatical errors that the student should attend to.

4) Refer students back to comments you wrote in the margins.

For example, you might comment, ‘Your argument loses focus in the fourth paragraph (see my questions in margin).’ You might

also note a frequent pattern of mechanical error, then point them to a specific paragraph that contains that type of error.

5) Model clear, concise writing.

Before you write final comments, take a moment to gather and order your thoughts.

Sources and Recommended Reading

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