

Rider University Online E-coaching Tips

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Teaching Online Tip #4: The importance of Feedback: Another Dimension of Presence

Feedback is simple, right? It just means letting students know how they are doing in a course. As research is showing, however, mastering the art of giving students feedback in an online course makes a real difference in student satisfaction and retention. This means getting feedback right often results in good feelings about the course content and experience and by extension, creates good feelings about an institution!

How many types of feedback are there? (Lots!) When is feedback important? (Almost always!) Does feedback always have to address individual's work or can feedback address the work of groups? (Both types can be useful!)

This tip discusses the most basic of feedback in instructional settings — that of feedback from a faculty member to students. Other types of feedback include peer feedback, automated feedback, and rich feedback. Of course, there is the type of feedback from the learners to the instructor about how the course is going, particularly in the early weeks of a course, but that is a different topic.

Feedback also includes newer forms of media formats, such as audio feedback on discussion boards or audio/video feedback using YouTube or other media sites, such as VoiceThread <www.voicethread.com>.

This tip focuses primarily on feedback channels from you, the instructor, to learners.

Feedback in Online Learning

Feedback is an element of any communication or dialogue. In fact, there is no real communication or dialogue without a feedback loop. Feedback can continue, support, shift or close out a train of thought. In online learning the type of feedback that first comes to mind is feedback on assignments or on discussion board postings. This is the most important feedback from a students' point of view. Learners want to know what you, the faculty member, "thinks" about the work that I as a learner am doing.

Simple Rules about Feedback in Online Learning

The most important rules about feedback from faculty to student are simple. Here are four reminders about feedback in online courses. You may want to copy and post them somewhere!

1. Provide feedback early and often!

"Providing feedback early" has multiple meanings. It can mean early in a course; it can also mean early in the phases of key projects or early following assignments!

Providing feedback early in a course can mean providing feedback even prior to the formal launching of a course. The week before the course beginning and the first two weeks of a course can be the most demanding on a faculty member. It is one of the best

investments you can make to plan on spending additional time in the first weeks getting to know your students and their own particular goals for learning. This is the time of any course for launching your course learning community. You may ask, “How do I provide feedback to the students in the first week if they have not handed in any assignment?” Here’s one technique used by online faculty.

In the first week, students introduce themselves and make statements about their expected learning goals and purposes for the course. With the ideas expressed in these postings, you can let students know that you are reading their postings and getting to know them by making observations about the connections and relationships among the learners’ life experiences and learning goals. This helps students see how their goals and purposes fit with the larger context created by the course content and the other learners.

This simple act sends the message that their postings are not going into a black hole! These connections can be shared working environments, similar life experiences, such as a love of baking bread or biking or having roots in Minneapolis! These observations create connections that build a foundation of community.

Similar connections can be made between course content and goals and a student’s background experiences and goals. You might observe “Your background in the XYZ sector may be especially relevant to the rest of the class when we discuss ABC topic in weeks 5 and 6.” This observation signals to the student that the instructor has connected with them in a unique way. The online medium permits faculty to individualize more than in a regular classroom, because everything each student says is recorded and can be reviewed later. Stating these kinds of observations requires first making the connections mentally between what they tell us about themselves and what we know of the content and also students’ work context. This ‘personalizing’ and ‘individualizing’ helps keep students engaged and motivated.

Some faculty take the time to organize student’s individual goals and characteristics into student profiles so that they can easily refresh and review these characteristics as useful.

2. Provide feedback on assignments when expected

If you do not tell students when to expect feedback on their assignments, they will expect it within minutes, if not seconds, of hitting the “send” or “upload” button!

For your own peace of mind, state your general rules for feedback turnaround times upfront in your policy documents, and syllabus. State your rules clearly and provide regular reminders. State your general rule of thumb for providing feedback (A good rule of thumb is 24 hours during the workweek) and then state it again in the assignment deadline. For larger projects, the turnaround time might be longer; other times you may want to adjust deadlines given your schedule.

This does mean planning assignment deadlines around your own teaching and life patterns. For example, if a week’s postings close on Saturday, you will likely need to schedule time on Monday for review and feedback on those postings! Also, if you know your final course grades are due three (3) days after the end of the final week, you may move the submission deadline for a final assignment up a few days or a week – to give you adequate time to provide feedback to students. For larger projects, the rule of thumb is generally between 7 to 10 days.

Online learners are particularly paranoid about the first cycle of assignments and feedback, because it is a benchmark for what will likely follow. Students will use the

feedback from the first assignment as a marker for what you think about their ideas and how they express themselves. It often determines how much time and effort they put into subsequent assignments. Some of the questions learners generally have are:

- How closely do you follow the assignment rubrics?
- Do you count timeliness?
- How much do you recognize or expect analysis, innovation or creativity?
- How much research do you expect?
- Do you notice grammar and spelling?

A good practice is to include the rubrics for an assignment in the assignment, or with a link to your standard rubrics. Examples of beginning rubrics and links are in the References and Resources section of this tip.

Some faculty have discovered that their students may not read or use the feedback that faculty have so conscientiously provided. If you have this experience with your students, you might want to try one of the following strategies:

- Have the students revise or improve on a part of a posting
- Ask the student to respond to the comments, possibly in an email
- Have a policy of grading posts more rigorously as the term progresses, with the expectation that feedback is being used

3. Provide rapid response to questions

For general discussion questions, it is important to answer questions promptly or have a system for questions being answered! An efficient use of the course site is to have an “online forum” where students can answer questions from other students and that you can monitor for questions that you may need to answer or supplement a learner’s answer.

Faculty new to online teaching often spend a great deal of time responding to students’ questions in emails. This is not generally recommended unless the question is of a confidential nature. The time, and the teaching presence, you spend creating and posting individual email is only useful to the individual student, leaving all the other learners out of the loop and possibly wondering where you are!

The course site is the place for discussion and feedback on assignments in general. A good rule of thumb: if a student asks a question, 3 to 5 others are also wondering but didn’t have the courage or take the time to ask. Thanking students for their questions is feedback that says, “I value your questions; “Keep your questions coming,” and “Your questions show that you are thinking!” Answering questions is part of your customized and personalized teaching presence for your students.

4. Provide feedback that is personal and formative for learning

Providing feedback to learners can be very time-consuming. In an effort to provide feedback, but also to save time, systems with automated feedback, embedded feedback, are available. Some of these systems are proving to be excellent and effective, as in the example of using rich feedback in quizzes etc in large introductory biology classes. (Cooper, et al., 2007). However, using those systems only work well as long as students are aware of how they are designed and their intended purpose. These systems are essentially a static interactive resource similar to a book, programmed tutorial, or preplanned interactive scenario. These systems can be very useful, as long as learners

do not believe they are receiving individual feedback based on their relationship with a faculty member.

Learners especially value feedback that is personal and formative for learning. Effective feedback assumes that the faculty is actually reading or listening to a learner and then analyzing and reflecting on the work and ideas of the learner. Personal feedback means that you, the instructor, is getting to know the student — as a person and as a mind — and that you are helping to shape and challenge the learning of the student. This type of feedback creates long-lasting and satisfying links and connections! No wonder that feedback is an element of student satisfaction and loyalty!

You probably have stories where your feedback to a student has made “all the difference” in someone’s life or learning. Please share any of your good stories if you can.

References and Rubric Resources

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Simple Three-Point Rubric

This simple rubric can be part of the discussion posting instructions. This rubric can be used for students to “self-grade” themselves at the end of the week. If you decide to use self-grading, you can focus on the content in your feedback to the students and simply agree/or disagree with the grading. Students often hold themselves to a higher standard than an instructor.

Simple Three-Point Rubric -		
One (1) Point: Minimal response to the topic question	Two (2) Points: Posting responds to the question but does not stimulate further class discussion	Three (3) Points: Posting fully addresses the question and stimulates at least one substantial follow-up posting

Source: Bartoletti, 2007.

Rubric with Measures of Time, Quantity, and Content

Here is a rubric to get started on a model for evaluating postings that you can adapt to your style of teaching and your content. These rubrics include measures of *time* (when and how often postings are posted); *quantity* (a length appropriate to the discussion topic); and *content* (resource-related, thoughtful and substantive) factor into the points earned. Another measure often included in rubrics is format, which includes appropriate adherence to written English. Instructors often invite or assign students to take a supportive monitoring role for some discussions, such as the role of evaluator or summarizer with additional points.

1. Timely and quantitative discussion contributions
 - Excellent: 3-4 postings per discussion, well distributed throughout the week with first posting occurring mid-week
 - Good: 2-3 postings per discussion, postings distributed throughout the week with first posting occurring before the weekend
 - Average: 1-2 postings per discussion, somewhat distributed with first posting occurring on the weekend
 - Poor: 0-1 postings per discussion, not distributed throughout the week with postings occurring on the weekend
2. Responsiveness to discussion and demonstration of knowledge and understanding gained from assigned reading
 - Excellent: Very clear that readings were understood and ideas were incorporated well into responses
 - Good: Clear that readings were understood and incorporated into responses
 - Average: Postings have questionable relationship to reading material or topic under discussion
 - Poor: No evidence that the readings were understood and/or were not incorporated into discussion
3. Adherence to on-line protocols for clear communications such as correct grammar, spelling, and understandable statement flow.
 - Excellent: All on-line protocols were followed
 - Good: One (1) online protocol was not followed
 - Average: Two-three (2-3) online protocols were not followed
 - Poor: Four or more online protocols were not followed

For more ideas and hints, you may want to simply google “rubrics” and your discipline!

Note: These Online Teaching tips are for faculty who are teaching online in Rider University's College of Continuing Studies [CCS]. These tips are part of an ecoaching service from Judith V. Boettcher at ecoach@designingforlearning.org. More tips are at <http://www.designingforlearning.info/>. Contact Judith with questions, requests to review your courses, and any other requests focused on providing the best teaching and learning experiences possible for Rider faculty and students.