Works in Progress: Formative Feedback as a Stress-busting Strategy

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Introduction

This poster describes the evolution of a semester-long project assigned to graduate students in Communication Sciences and Disorders, with a particular emphasis on the role of formative feedback.

First Attempt: The Icy Dread Strategy

A recipe for high stress levels all around
In my first year on campus, I assigned CSD master's students a semester-long project intended to spur them to an independent investigation of a treatment approach. I reviewed their questions in early November, but offered no opportunities for students to submit drafts for preliminary feedback.

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Student comments:
In their course evaluations, completed shortly before the assignment due date, students expressed worry and frustration about the assignment.

Instructor reflections, December 2011:
"That was exhausting and exasperating: overall, a bad idea."

First Attempt: Lessons Learned

1. Front-loading some of the work can make for a less stressful finals week, for students and instructors alike.

2. Many first-year graduate students need support to navigate the research literature.

3. Few students return at the start of a new semester to collect papers and view comments, limiting the utility of post-finals comments on written work.

4. The "icy dread" approach, in which students complete a large project with little input along the way, is a suboptimal pedagogical strategy, stressful for everyone.

Second Attempt: Formative Feedback as an All-You-Can-Eat Buffet

Hokkaido Seafood Buffet – San Mateo - 52. © Foodnut.com, 2011. Retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/foodnut/5515983896/. Licensed under CC BY NC ND 2.0.

Idea #1: Start early.

Students submitted potential topics in August, providing them with more time to search the literature, track down articles, and change direction if need be.

Idea #2: Establish a good foundation.

Students submitted an introduction and a bibliography in late August/early September, which required them to describe their rationale for the project and determine its feasibility.

Idea #3: Keep the wheels turning.

Students could receive formative feedback and a provisional grade on each element of the assignment, with deadlines approximately every two weeks across the semester.

Idea #4: If at first you don't succeed…

Students could submit revisions to receive additional feedback until they were satisfied with the outcome.

Second Attempt: Lessons Learned

Good news:
1. Explicit expectations assist students in producing work that meets instructor standards.
2. Electronic submissions create the opportunity for streamlined grading, with color-coded highlights indicating common error patterns.

Not-so-good news:
1. Students may not incorporate instructor feedback without a grading mechanism that keeps them accountable.
2. Offers to provide unlimited feedback create substantial workloads and the potential for instructor burnout.

Third Time's the Charm

Idea #1: Add in accountability.

For the third iteration of this assignment, all submissions received a preliminary grade. In contrast to the provisional grades from version #2, these grades were recorded in the gradebook – not just hypothetical. These initial grades might only be worth 10% of the final grade on a segment of the project, but the strategy discouraged students from submitting first drafts.

Idea #2: Add in even more accountability.

For each item that received feedback, the rubric for the final grade asked, "How well did this student incorporate the instructor's initial feedback?" This spurred students to make use of instructor comments and to continue their own revision process.

Idea #3: Offer feedback judiciously and explicitly.

Students all received feedback on their questions, their introductions, and their bibliographies. They could elect to receive feedback on any two other components of the project across the semester. This significantly reduced the grading time commitment while still clarifying expectations about the final product.

Idea #4: No more Lone Ranger: share the work.

Students spent one class period in a structured workshop activity, evaluating another student's draft with the instructor's rubric. They were also required to obtain and describe feedback from an outside reader. Student feedback on these activities was unanimously positive.

Grading Is Like Laundry

Frequent purges prevent hostile takeovers. Grading in smaller batches across the semester prevents December overload.

Outsourcing decreases your workload, fosters competence. Asking students to provide feedback to their peers sharpens their awareness of what's needed in their own work.

Laundry. © Jocelyn Durston, 2005. Licensed under CC BY NC ND 2.0. Retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/jocelyndurston/15161697/sizes/m/

Onward and Upward: More Ideas

- **Keep front-loading.** Many students asked for outside feedback to be provided earlier in the semester.

- **Keep outsourcing.** The comment that came up most often about the in-class workshop activity was that students would have appreciated the opportunity to do more of it. Many of them mentioned how much the process of providing feedback to another student helped them with editing their own work.

- **Create a spreadsheet early on to facilitate data management**. Grading a multi-component project across the course of the semester generates a lot of numbers. In future classes, I will need a better strategy for keeping track of those.

- **Keep thinking about strategies to boost uptake.** Most students took full advantage of the encouragement to make an initial submission into a better final product. Of course, there are always exceptions. What might improve incorporation of feedback? That's a question for 2015.

In summary…

"The feedback was EXTREMELY helpful."
Student comment, summer 2014

"And I didn't even despair for the future of humanity once." *Instructor email to Claire Lamonica, fall 2014*

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