Tips and Tricks for Grading and Providing Effective and Efficient Feedback in Writing Intensive Courses

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Author's Notes

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Author Biography

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The purpose of this piece is to explore methods for efficiently providing students with helpful feedback on their writing so as to best assist students in improving their writing and critical thinking. It explores various Canvas tools, text expanders, alternative grading techniques, and more. The techniques discussed here were inspired by conversations among faculty at Murray State University as well as among faculty members gathered at the 2019 Kentucky Pedagogicon.

Providing effective feedback to students is an important part of our role as instructors, particularly in writing-intensive courses in which we wish to encourage improvements in writing and in critical thinking (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). Effective feedback can provide students with clarity into the purpose of the assignments that we provide them (Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008) which can then reduce student apprehension, reduce cognitive load, and encourage deeper processing of information (Bolkan, 2016; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001). Effective feedback, perhaps most importantly, can also improve self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), which improves academic achievement in both online and traditional courses (Littlejohn, Hood, Milligan, & Mustain, 2016; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

That said, there are a number of challenges inherent to the grading and feedback process. From the instructor's perspective, providing effective feedback to students can be tedious and time-consuming (Dragga, 1985). The majority of American faculty, whether in online or face-to-face classes, spend the majority of their time dedicated to grading, providing feedback, and communicating with students (Mandernach, Hudson, & Wise, 2013). Even at research universities, faculty spend roughly 17 hours per week on teaching-related activities, much of which is comprised of providing feedback on student work (Link, Swann, & Bozeman, 2008). This feedback, though important, is often repetitive, with faculty reporting that they often provide the same or similar comments to students over and over again (Isaacson & Stacy, 2009). So repetitive is this feedback, in fact, that some have warned of the risk of repetitive stress injuries caused by extensive typing of comments (Campbell, 2017).

From the students' perspective, instructor feedback on writing can often feel like an attack (Caferella & Barnett, 2000). Bean, in fact, warns that "negative comments, however well-intentioned they are, tend to make students feel bewildered, hurt, or angry" (2011, p. 319). Perhaps because of the negative emotions associated with reading this feedback, 40% of the time, feedback is detrimental to students' further performance in a course (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Certainly, our goal as instructors is not to elicit this negative response in our students.

More than that, feedback on student writing can also feel subjective. Students are sometimes wary of instructor feedback and do not trust that the feedback is accurate (Zacharias, 2007). Perhaps they are correct in their wariness, because research shows that irrelevant factors such as student race can impact the feedback that individuals give on written essays (Harber, 1998). Historical work also describes the alarming discrepancy with which written assignments are graded. Specifically, in one investigation in which 300 essays were graded on a scale from 1-9 by multiple raters, more than 90% of assignments received 7 or more disparate ratings, and no essay scored received fewer than five different scores (Diedrich, 1974). One would hope that our grading has grown more accurate over time, but certainly student wariness is warranted, given this historical imprecision.

Purpose

The purpose of this work, therefore, is to discuss strategies for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of instructor feedback on student writing. Below, I outline strategies meant to increase accuracy and transparency in instructor grading and feedback while simultaneously reducing the tedium and other negative emotions associated with the grading and feedback process, all with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. Suggestions below were inspired by conversations with faculty at Murray State University, a student-centered mid-sized Midwestern University, during a semester-long book group on John Bean's, *Engaging Ideas*, sponsored by the university's faculty development center. Further ideas were inspired by conversations with faculty attendees to the 2019 Kentucky Pedagogicon, which focused on the theme, "Transparency in Teaching and Learning."

Using Efficient Methods to Provide Feedback

Providing efficient feedback on student work has been a topic of interest for quite some while. In fact, historical discussion of automatic grading goes back more than 50 years (Forsythe & Wirth, 1965). Today, many learning management systems (LMS) allow instructors to automatically grade multiple choice, fill in the blank, or other simple grading assignments. Furthermore, many systems can be programmed to give certain feedback based on a student's response to these questions (i.e.: "Great job!" when giving a correct response or "Try again! Think about our class discussion on Piaget." in response to incorrect answers). I fully support the use of these

wonderful tools when appropriate. However, for the purpose of this assessment, I would like to discuss methods for providing more extensive feedback to students while still remaining cognizant of instructor time constraints and student needs for clarity and objectivity.

Rubrics

Rubrics have long been touted as an important way of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of our feedback to students. They reduce subjectivity and increase clarity in assignment expectations (Isaacson & Stacy, 2009; Wang, 2017). They also save time and improve student learning in comparison to less-formalized grading methods (Stevens & Levi, 2013). While they can sometimes be difficult and time-consuming to norm, the rubric-creation process can be included in the instructional goals of a course. Namely, Andrade (2000) suggests using an "instructional rubric". In instituting this process, instructors, when creating new rubrics, should look for examples of rubrics of similar assignments that they then use as a template when creating their new rubric. That draft rubric can then be taken to class, where students work jointly with one another and the instructor to revise the draft, adding criteria and descriptions of quality for each criteria on the rubric.

Today, rubrics can be provided to students in many ways. Instructors may provide their students with paper copies of rubrics, or they may plug these rubrics into individual assignments in their LMS. Providing this electronic rubric through the LMS can allow instructors to provide color-coded feedback to students with the ease of the click of a button, whereas paper feedback may allow for more marginalia. Whether feedback is provided on paper or electronically, though, it is considered best practice to provide students with a copy of this rubric well in advance of their assignment deadline so that they may best understand the criteria on which their writing will be judged (Stevens & Levi, 2013).

Text Expanders

Sometimes student work, however, requires more extensive feedback on writing than a rubric can reasonably give. In this case, many instructors will turn to individualized comments or line editing provided in the margins of a student paper. However, as discussed above, such comments can become tiresome and repetitive to instructors. Thus, to increase efficiency, recent work has focused on using text expanders when providing such feedback. Such text expanders are tools that allow an instructor to provide extensive repetitive feedback with a few short keystrokes. In times of yore, many instructors maintained a Word document in which they gathered comments that they frequently made on student work for the purpose of copying and pasting these same (or similar) comments into future student work. Text expanders are a similar, but more updated, way of accomplishing the same. When using these programs, an instructor programs keyboard shortcuts that will trigger

their word processing program or internet browser to place more extensive feedback. For example, the shortcut, "AAtypo" could be used to auto-type for the instructor the more extensive feedback, "Whoops, it looks like you made a typo here. Those are really easy to miss. Try writing your paper a couple of days in advance so that you can read with fresh eyes". Campbell (2017) and Mandernach (2018) are both good resources for exploring the many text expander tools currently available and the benefits of using them.

Spaced Deadlines

Unfortunately, even when instructors reduce demands on their time using the aforementioned techniques, they can still find themselves buried in grading deadlines. In this case, a bit of foresight in the following semester can help to prevent overwhelm. Instructors who space course deadlines throughout the semester (rather than saving many for the final weeks of the semester) may find themselves better able to focus on grading one assignment at a time. What›s more, it appears that spreading out deadlines can improve student learning. Spaced deadlines improve the distribution of practice (i.e., reduce procrastination) in students, which in turn improves student performance on assignments and student learning (Fulton, Ivanitskaya, Bastian, Erofeev, & Medez, 2013; Nicolau, 2015). Furthermore, students who, when given the choice to take assessments early in the semester, choose those earlier deadlines, do better on those assignments than their peers who chose later deadlines (McManus, 2016). Throughout the semester, the gap between the early and late testers grows, perhaps because those who choose later deadlines have lower class attendance. In sum, it appears that distributing deadlines throughout the semester has benefits for both instructors and students.

Audio or Video Feedback

Improvements in technology allow us to go beyond traditional hand-written comments for students. As described above, many instructors choose to provide electronic/typed comments on student work, but many have chosen to abandon those comments in favor of audio or video comments delivered to the student through the LMS or email. Instructors give more feedback, on average, when using audio feedback (in comparison to traditional typed comments) on student work, and the feedback given is more positive and directed (Nemec & Ditzner, 2016). Students report that audio feedback helps to overcome difficulties with interpreting inflection in instructor comments and, perhaps as a result, they prefer audio feedback to typed comments and they show increases in learning and engagement (Nielson, 2016; Nemec & Ditzner, 2016). When discussing best practices for audio feedback, it is worth noting that students appear to value prompt but simple feedback to more extensive feedback that is returned later (Parkes & Fletcher, 2017).

Pass/Fail or Other Simplified Categories

Historical research suggests that pass/fail grading is associated with lower academic achievement (Gold, Reilly, Seiberman, & Lehr, 1971), but more recent research into the topic is more optimistic. In fact, these newer works suggest that pass/fail grading improves self-regulated learning, reduces stress, and creates greater group cohesion among classmates (Rohe et al., 2006; White & Fantone, 2010). Perhaps due to this reduction in stress, students, when allowed to choose between traditional grading and pass/fail grading will, on average, choose pass/fail grading, and those students who choose this pass/fail grading scheme have higher GPAs than their classmates who choose traditional grading schemes (Nyström, 2018). Instructors who feel uncomfortable with simple pass/fail schemes may feel more comfortable with pass with distinction/pass/fail schemes. Faculty teaching upper level seminars may also try freshman/sophomore/junior/senior (i.e. "this paper reflects the level of effort and critical thinking of a freshman, sophomore, etc.") scheme. The simplified grading should not be a substitute for proper feedback on student work, but the reduced emphasis on grades could allow instructors more time for providing feedback while providing the aforementioned benefits to student.

Conclusion

In conclusion, grades and feedback can be as difficult for instructors to provide as they are for students to receive. They are fundamentally important to the learning process, but are fraught with difficulties. The purpose of this paper was to explore ways to make the process more accurate, efficient, and helpful while overcoming barriers to student learning, such as stress, lack of transparency, and perceived subjectivity, while also addressing instructor concerns such as fatigue and competing demands on time. I am a firm believer in "small teaching", as James Lang (2016) would call it-- the idea that one small change in how we approach our pedagogy can have a large impact on student learning. I hope that one or more of the ideas here will inspire some "small teaching" in many of us, to the benefit of our students.

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