

POD —IDEA Center Notes

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IDEA Item #7: “Explaining the reasons for criticisms of students’ academic performance”

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Background

The relationship of student ratings to grades and grading has been the subject of much debate (1). While some propose that the ratings process has led to “grade inflation,” the consistent finding (2, 3, 4) that the grades and ratings correlate about .2 on average suggests that better teaching results in better learning and, subsequently, more student satisfaction. What other factors could account for the relationship? One important factor may be the extent to which students are able to assess their own learning. Studies of the dimensions of college teaching (5) place perceived outcome or impact of a course as the third most powerful correlate of both achievement (course tests or grades) and overall ratings of the teacher. If perceived learning is related to both achievement and satisfaction, it makes sense that providing students with accurate information about their progress will be a productive strategy for the students and the teacher.

From another quarter (6) there is strong evidence that providing feedback about students’ learning is an exceptionally useful teaching tool. That is, giving students accurate and timely feedback on their work allows them to see what they know and what they do not know. There is also a benefit for the teacher. Providing careful feedback and documenting that feedback can create a rich pool of assessment data that can not only point to difficult conceptual issues or student misunderstandings, but also guide the development of strategies for course improvement. It is essential assessment information. This IDEA item addresses one aspect of effective grading: the provision of useful and accurate feedback for improvement.

Because criticism and grades are highly emotional aspects of the learning process, a low score on this item may especially require gathering more complete information from your students about what

is really going on. Examine the distribution of responses: did all students give a low rating, or were the responses bifurcated? Do student comments indicate student dissatisfaction with your grading, your feedback, or both? Did the problem extend to all the class work, or was there a single incident or assignment where students felt they did not get adequate feedback or fair grades? If a low score on this item has surprised you, you’ll want to monitor more carefully the pulse of the class throughout a semester. For example, after the first test or project of the term has been returned to students with grades and comments, ask students to write anonymously in class for 5-10 minutes about the grades and feedback they got from you: e.g. “Did you get a grade you felt was fair? Why or why not? Did you get enough feedback? Was the feedback helpful? Did I effectively explain the reasons for any criticism or low grade on your work? How could my responses have been more helpful to your learning? How could you, yourself, do better next time?” At the next class session (or by e-mail) summarize students’ replies and explain how you will use students’ suggestions or why you cannot do so.

Helpful Hints

Once you understand students’ point of view, the larger challenge will be to integrate your response within a coherent set of what Dee Fink terms “significant learning experiences” (7). You must figure out how to give genuinely helpful responses, and also keep your workload within reasonable bounds.

Here are some strategies that might be helpful. Give only the number of major assignments and tests to which you can offer substantial response. Completing a large number of tests and assignments may be less helpful to students than a

smaller number on which they get enough good guidance to help them improve.

Give students a detailed, written set of grading criteria before they start work on the assignment or test (2).

Replace autopsy with coaching—that is, intervene with guidance early and often during a project, and help students prepare well for their tests, rather than spending all your feedback time on response to final work that can no longer be changed (6, 7).

If you are using peer response at any point in the development of a student project, talk with them about the role of peer response. Some students may not give weight to their colleagues' suggestions, no matter how helpful, and they may complain that they needed the teacher's response. Perhaps allow students to come to you *after* peer response, to get more feedback. Let them know that the first question you will ask them is, "What did your peers say?" Sometimes, you'll be able to say, "I agree. I think your peers gave you good feedback." That's all some students need to hear. In other cases, you may say, "I would add that..." or "I disagree with your peer readers..." If too many students come back to you, rethink the timing and/or structure of peer feedback.

Explain how you will respond to a particular assignment and why. For example, "On this first draft, I am not going to mark issues of grammar, punctuation, awkward language, or format; I will only give feedback on the big-picture issues such as whether your thesis is clear, your organization sensible, and your claims well-supported."

Distinguish between the feedback you will give on drafts and on final papers, explaining that draft feedback guides revision; final feedback offers broad lessons to carry to the next assignment, class, or professional responsibility. Explain, too, the difference between the feedback you will give on journals or other informal class-preparatory writing, and the feedback you will give on major assignments (7, 8).

Make clear that the purpose of your response is to help students learn in your syllabus, in class, and in all your feedback—that is the mantra that guided the "best college teachers" Bain has studied (9). It will provide a basis for a learning collaboration between you and your students, for a friendly tone on your part even when you are disappointed in their work, and for a sense on their part that they have a coach, not an executioner, responding to their work.

Assessment Issues

As indicated above, the provision of feedback to students serves two purposes: keeping the students informed, and alerting the teacher to issues that

need attention. How can a teacher tell if feedback strategies are effective? A straightforward strategy is to observe the degree to which students are understanding and using the feedback. Is student work improving? Another approach is to ask students to explain or paraphrase the feedback to the teacher or to other students. If they cannot explain the meaning of the feedback, it may not be clear or complete enough. A third strategy is to ask students to suggest, on the basis of the feedback, how their or others' work can be improved. This not only supports learning the content, it also is a meta-cognitive exercise that addresses how to learn most effectively. Developing ways of providing effective feedback can also save a great deal of time: a very practical benefit for the teacher.

References and Resources

- (1) For example, see the series of pro and con articles in (1975). *American Psychologist*, 52(11), 1182-1186.
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- (3) Franklin, J., & Theall, M. (1991). Grade inflation and student ratings: A closer look. Paper presented at the 72nd annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Chicago: April 7. ERIC # ED 349 318.
- (4) Marsh, H. W. (1987). Students' evaluations of university teaching: Research findings, methodological issues, and directions for future research. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11, 253-388
- (5) Feldman, K. A. (1989). The association between student ratings of specific instructional dimensions and student achievement: Refining and extending the synthesis of data from multisection validity studies. *Research in Higher Education*, 30, 583-645.
- (6) Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1991). Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 47. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (7) Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (8) Walvoord, B. E., & Anderson, V. J. (2004). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (9) Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.

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