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teaching failures

The Challenge of Providing High-Quality Feedback Online: Building a Culture of Continuous Improvement in an Online Course for Adult Learners

EMILY HODGE AND SUSAN CHENELLE

ABSTRACT Scholars of online learning have acknowledged the additional challenges an online format poses to relationship building and providing effective feedback. This article describes the authors' experiences providing feedback to adult learners in an online educational leadership course, the challenges they encountered in providing this feedback in a timeframe and manner to which students were receptive, and their research into how to build a culture of continuous improvement in an online course for adult learners. The authors conclude that effective online feedback occurs when course projects are sequenced to provide opportunities for students to receive and engage with feedback formatively, when instructors set clear expectations about feedback timelines, and when instructors take advantage of the variety of feedback mechanisms online environments can provide, including peer and instructor feedback, as well as self-reflection.

KEYWORDS
online teaching,
feedback, assessment,
social presence, adult
learners

For a class that pushes for fair assessments and transparency in terms of grading, grades were NOT returned in a timely matter. We needed to have feedback from one assignment in order to work on the next. We wouldn't get that feedback at all until about a day or two prior to the next assignment's due date. This left very little time to work on assignments.... I would suggest not having two people with different styles of grading grade a course that has this many assessments. It's virtually impossible to understand what and how we are being assessed and expected to do.

—Anonymous student evaluation comment

As a third-year assistant professor of educational leadership still finding my way to balancing teaching, research, and service, I (Emily) was excited for the opportunity to teach two online sections of a foundational curriculum course,

“Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment,” to prospective educational leaders. I had not taught this course in an online format since my first year as an assistant professor, so I was looking forward to improving the course and to co-teaching with an experienced English/language arts teacher and coach (Susan).

As a second-year supervisor of curriculum and instruction and first-year doctoral student, I (Susan) was both eager and anxious about the opportunity to co-teach the course with Emily. I welcomed the opportunity to revisit the kinds of readings and activities related to curriculum and assessment that I had encountered during my own online supervisory certificate program, from my current perspective as a practicing (though relatively new) administrator. At the same time, I remembered the frustration I experienced as a student during online classes when an instructor’s expectations were unclear or when we were required to work with peers without building relationships first. It was important to me to try to avoid contributing to such feelings among our students, especially because of my inexperience as an online instructor for adult students.

Educational leadership students, who are generally practicing teachers on their way to being supervisors, principals, or other educational leaders, generally take the “Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment” course early in the program. The course is designed so that students will investigate the varied definitions of curriculum, identify and research a curricular issue, develop a collaborative process within their school or district for curricular change, and design professional development to support that change. This course also emphasizes the connections between curriculum, instruction, assessment, and federal and state policy. Our program’s online courses run for eight weeks, as both the online format and shorter length are ways that we accommodate the working professionals seeking degrees/certifications in educational leadership.

However, the eight-week format has often proved challenging to me (Emily) as an instructor in trying to select the most important content to fit within an eight-week course organized into one-week modules, as well as sequencing assignments so that culminating projects are well scaffolded within the shorter time period. Assignments were due on Sunday, and the next course module began on Monday, and the frenetic pace of an eight-week course made it difficult for me to provide comments to students in a timeframe that allowed them to receive feedback on one assignment before moving onto the next.

Our Initial Approach

Both authors are former English/language arts teachers and were aware of the components of good feedback: primarily, that it be timely enough to be actionable, focused and specific, forward-looking, and written with a positive tone, suggesting actionable changes to be made in the future (Bonnell; Getzlaf et al.). In addition, we both understood research about adult learning that

shows adults are particularly sensitive to feeling respected and validated in the classroom, and want a clear connection between assignments and future job responsibilities (Merriam). We also were aware of the potential challenges inherent in building strong relationships with students in an online setting (Beins), as well as the need to have strong inter-rater reliability and consistency in our grading approach since we shared grading duties.

To build relationships with students, we set up an initial discussion board for students to introduce themselves with photos and links that represented people and activities important to them. We responded to each student, welcoming them to the class and commenting on a personal detail they had shared to try to build connections with students early on. We felt this informal introduction to the course, to us as instructors, and to each other was a valuable first step before engaging in course content to help students feel comfortable in the online course format, both technologically and socially. As Beins wrote in an article titled “Small Talk and Chit Chat: Using Informal Communication to Build a Learning Community Online,” we felt it was important to cultivate the “feeling that the people on the other side of the words we read are real and embodied” (165). We also put students into small discussion groups to help them form relationships with each other. During the second week of the course, Emily met with each discussion group to build connections between her and the students in each group; we also held a synchronous class session in week three for students to make sure that they understood the course-long curriculum project.

To address the challenge of inter-rater reliability, we met on Tuesdays to look together at the assignment students had turned in on Sunday. In these meetings, Emily described her expectations for the assignment and the types of misunderstandings she anticipated students might have based on having previously taught the course. Then Emily and Susan graded several assignments together to clarify the application of the rubric and the type of comments that Emily felt were appropriate on that assignment. Susan and Emily planned to have assignments graded one week after they were turned in, at which point Susan came to Emily with questions about individual student work for Emily to check. Emily also checked over all grades across sections before releasing grades to ensure that students were receiving grades and feedback that she felt were fair.

However, these procedures for inter-rater reliability had the unintended consequences of delaying students' feedback and did not prevent students from having the perception that we graded assignments differently. We also ran into challenges around providing timely feedback while attending academic conferences. In weeks 6 and 7, both Susan and Emily were attending the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, and feedback on an annotated bibliography took two weeks to return. To make sure students could move forward without yet receiving complete feedback, we looked through

student work for “red flags” that might impede their progress and alerted them to areas of concern.

Unanticipated Challenges

Despite our efforts, it was clear when we received the course evaluations that students across sections felt their feedback was not timely enough and had concerns about inter-rater reliability. We also noticed that averages on the quantitative components were quite different across the two sections. In one section, where students seemed to generally understand the course requirements, scores were 0.5–1 point higher on a five-point-scale than in the second section, where a few students seemed to misunderstand the elements of the major project and did not receive high grades. Our interpretation of the lower scores in the second section is that there were a few students who did not understand the expectations for the assignments. The lack of timely, actionable feedback for these students obstructed their progress and left them feeling disgruntled at expectations they found unclear. Moreover, despite our efforts to build a strong classroom community, we did not participate in group discussion boards, for example, which may have helped students feel that we were paying attention to how their ideas developed and also given them confidence that they could be successful in the course. We now realize that our adult students are task-oriented, working professionals who want feedback quickly, especially when in a mostly asynchronous online course where feedback is one of the primary forms of interaction with the instructors.

Reviewing the Literature on Effective Online Feedback

While co-teaching this course, I (Susan) began reviewing the literature on effective online feedback. These studies aligned with our intention to give high-quality feedback and with the challenges we encountered in terms of timelines. The research also pointed toward areas in which we could improve. For instance, we had hoped our feedback would spur further reflection and learning in our students, so we offered suggestions and asked questions, rather than making direct corrections of student work (Wolsey), except in cases where a particular misconception might lead to significant difficulty later on in the course. We made a point of linking direct praise to a specific aspect of students’ performance, rather than merely stating “nice work” or “good job” (Wolsey), though we occasionally fell short in this regard due to time constraints. And we tried to personalize feedback by using students’ names and making specific reference to students’ work or professional context (Getzlaf et al.; Wolsey). The delay in our feedback and the compressed timeline for the course both, however, limited students’ opportunity to reflect on and interact with our feedback and use it to gauge their progress, consider

alternative strategies, and identify ongoing learning needs (Bonnell). We also did not consult students about what kinds of feedback they would find most useful (Getzlaf et al.).

In the studies I reviewed, what students considered sufficiently prompt feedback varied; however, participants noted the importance of knowing when to expect feedback, that it be received in time to be utilized on subsequent assignments, and that it address both the process formatively and the end product (Getzlaf et al.; Coll et al.; Alvarez et al.). Finally, students preferred feedback that helped them look forward both within the course and toward their lives and careers beyond the course (Getzlaf et al.; Bonnell). Collectively, these studies underscored the importance of making feedback an intentional part of course design: sequencing steps in course projects to provide opportunities for students to receive and engage with feedback formatively, communicating when students should expect to receive feedback, and utilizing the variety of feedback mechanisms online environments can provide, including group feedback, automated feedback, peer feedback, and self-reflection, in addition to instructor feedback (Bonnell; Wolsey).

Our Next Steps

Given these findings, we have carefully reflected on what we might have done differently to improve the teaching of this online course. One change we plan to incorporate is greater use of video chats with students whose work displays red flags early on. Although we believed that our written feedback was clear, the students who struggled did not seem to incorporate this feedback into later tasks, and perhaps a different medium would have helped to convey the actionable steps students needed to move forward. Although timely, actionable feedback is important and an area of improvement for the next time we teach this course, providing a feedback timeline so that students and the instructor have similar expectations is also an important part of providing effective feedback (Bonnell; Wolsey). We plan to be clearer to students about when and what type of feedback they can expect and to be transparent about our procedures for inter-rater reliability in grading as well.

We also plan to keep improving our online presence so that students have multiple opportunities to feel connected to us. Our learning management system allows us to provide video and audio comments in the grading interface, so we plan to experiment with different types of feedback. We also want to continue to refine our strategies for building a strong classroom community. Instead of grading students' online discussion posts individually with one brief comment per person, we are currently experimenting with writing a single response back to each discussion group, incorporating quotes from each group member. Consistent with the literature, group responses seem to be helping students to gauge their progress in relationship to others, and responding within the group

discussion board has allowed us to reinforce the value of the shared discussion space for strengthening ties between students and ourselves.

The kinds of interpersonal feedback that happen in face-to-face classes and may be missing or difficult to reproduce in online settings make it especially important that written instructor feedback be as effective as possible (Getzlaf et al.; Wolsey). To address student concerns about feedback in an online setting, research emphasizes the importance of developing a strong online presence to connect with students (such as the kind of relationships built during video chats) and providing feedback that provides questions and suggestions designed to move students towards future goals (Bonnel; Coll et al.; Getzlaf et al.; Van der Kleij et al.; Wolsey). However, these studies also reveal that there is little specific guidance for designing and implementing feedback in online educational settings (Coll et al.; Getzlaf et al.). It is our hope that this article begins to outline some specific feedback practices that instructors of online courses can use to build strong classroom communities and facilitate high-quality learning experiences for students.

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