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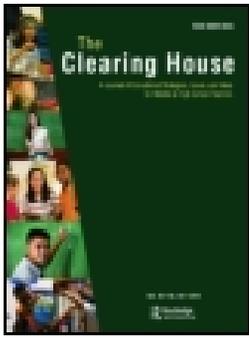


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Lessons from Alternative Grading: Essential Qualities of Teacher Feedback

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ABSTRACT

One critically important step in the instructional process is providing feedback to students, and yet, providing timely and thorough feedback is often lacking due attention. Reasons for this oversight could range from several factors including increased class sizes, vast content coverage requirements, extracurricular responsibilities, and the generally hectic daily schedules of teachers. This article synthesizes the findings from a year-long qualitative study investigating the alternative grading practices of five high school teachers and gives particular attention to the nature of the feedback these teachers provided to their students. Teachers' feedback is pared down to its essential qualities in order to offer manageable and practical strategies to current classroom teachers for providing effective feedback to their students.

KEYWORDS

Feedback; alternative grading; secondary education; student learning

My main purpose when providing feedback to students is to help them grow. It is not always easy for them to see everything that I see. I try to make my feedback transparent and my expectations clear. At the same time, I try not to stifle their creativity. They should strive to be original in their thoughts and in their designs—I don't want 30 copies of the same thing. (Christine, a high school graphic design teacher.)

Providing quality feedback to students is an essential element of any teacher's job. According to Wiggins (2011), feedback must be timely, actionable, and consistent in order to be effective. Nonetheless, in practice these qualities of feedback are often minimized, or in the worst cases neglected entirely. There are likely several reasons for this, most stemming from a host of mandated responsibilities which also accompany the profession: lesson planning, designing engaging activities, aligning content to standards, managing classroom environments, supervising extracurricular activities, and reporting grades. The purpose of this article is to isolate essential aspects of teachers' feedback based upon one research study of alternative grading practices among five high school teachers (Percell 2014), and to present manageable strategies for current teachers to employ feedback within their classrooms more effectively.

A place for feedback

Providing feedback to students is a critically important step in the learning process, and yet in many classrooms feedback only occurs at the end of assignments, almost serving as a postmortem in justifying a student's final grade. Even among veteran teachers, the feedback they provide to their students may lack the effectiveness they wish it to have, especially if it assumes an air of judgment or critique as to whether or not students have produced the right answer. Wiggins (2011) states that feedback is information that we receive regarding our efforts to achieve a certain goal. To classroom teachers, setting goals and objectives is nothing new, but the feedback they impart to students can be advantageous to meeting those ends when it is utilized as a tool for stimulating growth and understanding.

As a teacher educator who specializes in assessment—and alternative grading practices, in particular—I feel it is crucial to prepare teacher candidates with an understanding of best assessment practices. However, in conversations with my current undergraduates, it is clear that they have not always had the best feedback practices modeled in their own schooling experiences. My candidates relate experiencing teachers who shortchanged the feedback process. They report having felt deflated by teachers

who took all semester to return assignments that they had worked diligently to complete, or others who gave feedback in extremely superficial or menial ways—with stars, smiley faces, or isolated, arbitrary numbers, e.g. “48.” My teacher candidates have also described instances where entirely fraudulent submissions (they have another term for it) passed for completion. Situations like this only serve to demotivate students in the learning process.

Prioritizing student learning was a key finding in a year-long qualitative study I recently conducted investigating alternative grading practices among secondary classroom teachers—that is any grading system that differs from the traditional, points-based system (Percell 2014). Drawing upon individual teacher interviews, focus group data, and a feedback self-analysis from each teacher, the study sought to answer the question: How does the use of an alternative grading system impact teachers’ instructional practices? Another finding that emerged from the study was the essential nature of feedback and its heightened importance in alternative grading systems. Table 1 lists the five teacher participants: Christine, Brandi, Simon, Titus, and Everett (all names pseudonymous), their content areas, years of experience, and the type of alternative grading system they employed, as well as their subsequent feedback style. This article synthesizes the teachers’ feedback self-analyses, where several themes emerged towards improving the effectiveness of feedback upon student performance, namely that feedback needs to be process-oriented, personal, and is best presented in an informal, but genuine fashion.

Feedback should be process-oriented

Perhaps the most important element of teacher feedback is that it remains process-oriented. As opposed to praise, which is merely exclamations of emotional admiration (Burnett 2002), feedback is commentary designed to assist students as they advance from one competency to the next. Wiggins (2012) distinguishes between praise and feedback by drawing analogies from the sports world. Statements of praise such as, “you did a great job” do not register as feedback. Instead, true feedback offers suggestions on how to improve upon one’s performance, how take it to the next level.

In order to situate teacher feedback within this process-oriented framework, it is important to

conceptualize learning as a fluid process. Dweck (2007) described intelligence as fluid and malleable—where individuals with “growth mindsets” maintain a perception that they have the ability to grow their intelligence, as opposed to individuals with “fixed mindsets,” where intelligence and ability levels are perceived as predetermined and stagnant. Dweck’s theory has been widely embraced by the educational community where teachers acknowledge the value growth mindsets have in the learning process (Editorial Projects in Education 2016). However, Dweck’s framework has also been criticized in instances where it was adopted inauthentically (Kohn 2015), merely praising students’ effort in order to boost self-esteem in the short-term and creating “false growth mindsets” (Dweck 2015). Nevertheless, classroom teachers have indicated a desire for more professional development on properly incorporating growth mindsets into their instruction, and one clear way to do so is through process-oriented feedback.

While all of the participants in this study viewed learning as an ongoing process, Brandi was the most outspoken about it. She adamantly insisted that true learning has no beginning or end, but rather that students are constantly learning regardless of time and location. She made sure that belief was reflected in her alternative grading practices, and she did so by keeping her feedback goal-oriented and formative.

Keep it formative

For Brandi, learning in her classroom was not confined to the beginning and end dates of the semester, and the feedback she provided her students reflected that perspective accordingly. “It’s daily process,” she said, “As they’re working, I’m walking around the room and I can see what they’re doing. If I see they’re on the wrong track, I stop and ask questions, we can have a discussion about that.”

Offering her students a discussion-based platform kept her feedback comments situated within the continuum of the learning process. “It’s ongoing,” she said, “It’s not over until the semester ends.”

Brandi cited her belief in the fluidity of the learning process as her primary reason for abandoning a traditional, points-based grading system and adopting alternative grading in the first place. “Before, they had already received their points and so they were done. Now, they aren’t working for points anymore, they’re working for the attainment of the skill or the

Table 1. Teacher participants' alternative grading systems and feedback.

Teacher	Subject	Years Teaching	Alternative grading system used	Feedback typically provided to students
Brandi	FCS	28	Standards-based grading	Informal, task-oriented
Christine	Technology	5	No points grading	Digital—Google doc
Everett	Art	25	Summative grading	Conversational, goal-oriented
Simon	Social science	3	3Ps grading	Encouraging and conversational
Titus	English/speech	30	Minimum grading	Conversational, goal-oriented

knowledge,” she said. “They will redo things, whereas before they would just take the B or the C, because that was good enough. Now they’ll redo it because they want their skills to improve.”

In fact, all of the teachers from this study allowed students to revise and resubmit assignments, which proved to be an essential element of their alternative grading practices. They prioritized student learning above all else—even timelines and deadlines. According to Everett, “Some of these kids may not get it right at the beginning of the semester, but as long as they get it by the end, we’re good. I mean, that’s the goal: that by the time they leave the class, they’ve learned what they’re supposed to have learned.”

Keep the end in mind

Another way to ensure that the feedback process remains formative is to keep it focused on clear-cut goals and objectives. Brandi offered another good example of this. As opposed to simply moving through content in a linear fashion, as she used to do, Brandi re-focused her instruction on specific proficiencies and skill development within her family consumer science classes—hemming a seam or notching a garment. This allowed her to orient her feedback towards more specific lesson objectives that clearly communicate the task to students.

“It either confirms what they thought,” said Brandi, “or if it doesn’t then hopefully they would question why that was. If they don’t ever question, then they’re probably not thinking and processing what they’ve done.”

Feedback should be personal

The idea that individual feedback should be personal for students may seem obvious, but actually presenting feedback in a personal manner can be challenging. As Simon related, when a teacher must provide written feedback for 130 students on every assignment, it can quickly become a daunting task—one that can sometimes lead to the aforementioned shortcomings with teacher feedback. However, these teachers offered

several strategies regarding their efforts to make their own feedback more personal:

Keep it encouraging

One seemingly obvious aspect of feedback is to try to be encouraging throughout in order to maintain a personal approach. Still, this is sometimes easier said than done. “The feedback that I tend to give is encouraging,” Simon said. “Just the other day we were working on the research project that they were doing as a group, and at the end of the class I made a point to tell them, ‘This is very hard material. I know some of you are struggling with it’—I just made a point to say something encouraging to the whole class and give them that feedback.”

Repurposing feedback to students that is focused on encouragement rather than praise is one way to employ it as a motivational tool that students can relate to personally.

Keep it constructive

Many of these strategies sound inherently obvious, such as the need to frame feedback to students positively, and yet feedback can so often deteriorate into heavy-handed finger wagging. Simon related his attempts to ensure that his feedback is positive and constructive in nature. “I try to encourage my students to think more critically and to keep exploring and keep opening their minds.” He described pushing his students to take their ideas even further than they had previously thought possible. “I’m usually saying things like, ‘This is a great start, but you have to explain this further ...’ ‘Don’t stop here ...’ or ‘You’ve only scratched the surface; there’s way more here ...’”

Feedback should be informal

Informal feedback has a relaxed quality that appeals to students. While the term “informal” may be perceived as less important, especially in an era dominated by documented achievement levels, presenting feedback informally makes it accessible to students on

their level and generates more individually relevant critiques. Everett related a good example of this saying, “I may do six or eight laps around the class by the end of the class period,” he said, “but I get to go around and talk to each kid, look at what they’re doing, make suggestions, give them some constructive criticism, so they’re getting feedback daily, usually multiple times daily.”

Some suggestions that these teachers identified for keeping feedback informal was to maintain the conversational and encouraging tone at all times.

Keep it concise

Thanks to social media and microwaves, our students are firmly entrenched in the business of instant gratification, and their desire for immediacy should inform the type of feedback teachers offer their students. Christine felt perplexed when she offered students more formal feedback—longer, extensive comments typed on digital documents that were saved in students’ shared drives, only to find a large number of students who never even bothered to open the folder. “I would say, ‘Hey, did you see my comments? What did you think about that?’ and they were like, ‘No. I haven’t.’ I wish there was a way that I could get them even more feedback.”

In these moments, brevity is the key. Feedback not only needs to be formative and informational, but it must be communicated through channels that students are accustomed to accessing, and those roads are typically short and sweet, sometimes 140 characters or less.

Keep it conversational

While I was observing in her technology classes, Christine circulated from one student to the next, examining their progress on their digital poster projects and offering them brief comments, suggestions, and insight. “The first few days of the project I will walk around and have mini-conversations with the kids and just kind of see what they’re thinking for their project,” she said, “We just talk a lot and have a lot of conversation.” In addition to the conversations, several of the teachers reported holding one-on-one student conferences; Christine mentioned holding somewhere between four and six per student per semester. “We have a lot of student conferences,” she said, “I have a lot of conferences with them where we just talk.”

Similarly, much of Titus’s feedback revolved around conversations within the classroom. “We do a lot of conversation,” he said. “It might just be two minutes for each student, but the rest of the room is working on their assignments.” Titus conducted mini-conferences similar to what Christine described, which allowed him to check-in with individual students’ current progress, all while the rest of the class was working to get ahead. Maintaining a conversational approach to the feedback process allowed him to connect with his students on a personal level.

Feedback should be genuine

Above all, teachers’ feedback has to be genuine. Students can spot insincerity a mile away and trivial comments or markings that are passed off as feedback tend to do more harm than good. It is far better to be brief, informal and honest than to offer some perfunctory comment just to write something down. In terms of written feedback, Simon stated, “Some assignments are not that long or substantive, so [my feedback] is very brief, but I don’t just write stuff to write stuff. If I don’t really have anything to say, I’m not going to write something just so I can look like I’m giving feedback.”

Keep it on the level

In the same way, feedback should not be a type of trap lying in wait for students to stumble into blindly. “I’m not trying to trick them with anything,” said Everett, “If they’re doing something wrong, or if they’ve missed something and they’re not demonstrating something on the rubric, they can rethink and then go back and fix it. I mean, my goal is for them to demonstrate that they’ve learned all of the material. That’s my goal.”

Putting it all together

Teaching is a challenging profession where obstacles are numerous, emotions are fluctuating, and the rewards are largely elusive. Daily, there are incidents of spontaneity that are out of teachers’ direct control, which still have to be managed nonetheless. Within this hectic calling, we, teachers must make a conscious effort utilize feedback as a purposeful tool to connect with students and encourage them towards their goal (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Essential elements of purposeful feedback.

Process-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative in nature—process is paramount! • Tied to objectives (or standards)—know your desired student outcomes ahead of time
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging—push students to be their best, as opposed to praising them for their efforts • Constructive—building upon student performance
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concise—less is more • Conversational—keep your tone fluid and friendly
Genuine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity is essential—trust has to be earned

From this study, it is clear that these teachers strove to engender student learning directly through their alternative grading practices. Nonetheless, their own self-analyses revealed a disconnect between students' interpretations of the feedback they received and the original intended message the teachers had hoped to impart. Even among the most veteran and vigilant of teachers, feedback provided to students as information towards their pursuit of a goal or objective can easily miss the mark.

Therefore, through a renewed commitment to purposeful feedback that is process-oriented, personal, informal, and genuine, teachers can establish a channel of communication that is foundational to sustaining a relationship of confidence and trust, one that works to ensure student growth and an improved quality of work. In such a role, providing feedback is not just an essential element of instruction, but also a dynamic tool

for reaching, motivating, and propelling our students to realize their own potentials.

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