

Chapter Six

Meaningful Feedback in an Online Classroom

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Bailey is an aspiring candidate in an online teacher education program. She is enrolled in her first semester of college, returning after completing her bachelor's degree ten years earlier, earned by attending an on-campus program. Bailey is returning to school to earn her teaching degree while a full-time, single parent and working 35–40 hours a week.

She is apprehensive about this online platform for learning because she enjoyed the face-to-face interaction with her instructor and classmates during her first degree. She found the brick-and-mortar classroom an environment where she could receive immediate feedback for her thoughts and ideas on the activities and assessments including classroom discussions. She also found time with her classmates an opportunity to receive feedback and a way to gauge her understanding of the book chapter she had just read or the activity, assignment, or assessment she had just completed.

In particular, the dialogue with her professor during class provided an opportunity to gauge her understanding and to ask questions and receive immediate feedback that allowed her to increase her understanding of the information presented in the course. As she entered her first online course, she worried that she would not be able to demonstrate authentic progress or receive meaningful feedback from her instructor or classmates that would allow her to feel confident in her understanding of the course content.

Meaningful feedback can come naturally, almost instinctually, for instructors in a brick-and-mortar classroom. A simple nod of affirmation, eye contact, or a brief comment from a professor can be a powerful reinforcement for learners. When moving to an online classroom, strategies for providing feedback

might not always come this naturally. However, if approached with an emphasis on intentionality, meaningful feedback can become a more natural or regular process for any instructor teaching online through a learning management system.

Meaningful feedback is an important aspect of assessment for any learning environment regardless of the delivery mode, online or in a face-to-face classroom setting. Feedback is a part of the learning process that provides guidance to students to deepen their learning, and it allows learners to monitor their performance in a course. Feedback also offers the course instructor the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the course content they are providing (Cooper, 2016). As illustrated in figure 6.1, feedback supports the learning cycle, and provides opportunities for enhanced academic growth with numerous benefits to the learner.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM

In an online classroom, students have the opportunity to show their understanding of the content through individual assignment submissions, online discussions, online activities, and course assessments. Each of these modalities of learning provide the instructor the opportunity to assess a student's understanding and provide them with meaningful feedback that promotes deep understanding. Meaningful feedback is information provided to the learner based on an assigned task with a focus to improve the learner's performance and understanding of the course content. (Rottmann & Rabi-doux, 2017).

Often times, the feedback is based in part on the relationship built between an instructor and a student. Effective educators learn to "read" their students' responses to feedback and adjust their approaches to meet their students' academic needs. For example, some students appreciate public forms of affirmation where others prefer a more private form of guidance. Just as with face-to-face instruction, feedback to the learner in an online environment can be adapted for individual student needs and can occur through written or verbal communication (see the "Related Resources" section below). These high-touch elements of providing written or verbal feedback add a more personalized level of attention to an online course and create a teaching "presence" in an online learning community, which can aid in forming important teacher-to-student relationships. Whether written or verbal, meaningful feedback on assignments should enhance critical thinking, reflective practice, and develop instructor-student relationships (Rottmann & Rabi-doux, 2017).

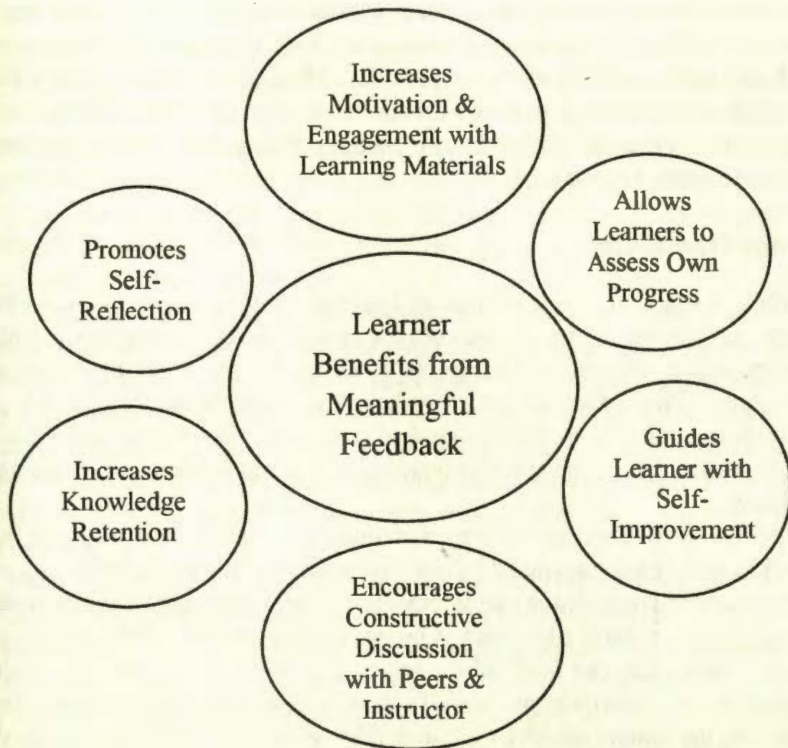


Figure 6.1. Benefits of Meaningful Feedback for Learners. Adapted from "Why Meaningful Feedback Is So Important for Online Learning," by S. Cooper, 2016, *ELearning Best Practices* (<https://elearningindustry.com/meaningful-feedback-online-learning>).

FEEDBACK IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM

Individual Online Assignments

Individual assignments are usually the cumulating piece of a self-paced module that the student has completed. Individual assignment feedback is more than providing a student a total score on their completed assignment. These individual assignments provide the instructor the opportunity to deliver a level of feedback to the learner similar to what they can provide in a face-to-face learning environment.

In order to promote optimal learning and deeper understanding, students need specific and meaningful feedback that encourages them to think critically about their work as well as to reflect on their own learning process. This carefully designed feedback (written or oral) can allow the student to see

their own learning in new ways and to gain increased satisfaction from it. It promotes critical thinking and valuable time for guided reflection by the student, and it allows the student to focus on areas they need to improve their work and understanding of the content. In addition, this more individualized feedback can also help promote constructive dialogue between the course instructor and student focused on enhancing the acquisition of the course student learning objectives.

Online Discussions

Building a sense of community is an important aspect of face-to-face classrooms, and is a focus for online courses as well. Many instructors in online courses utilize discussion forums as a means for building this classroom community. These discussion forums help build relationships among all participants and allow instructor-to-student and student-to-student communication to occur. This vital communication is a powerful form of meaningful feedback.

Online discussions are a way for students to post their response to a question or scenario presented by the instructor and allows the other students in the course the opportunity to interact with their classmates through written or oral (video or audio) feedback. Online discussions are a focused dialogue between peers that can scaffold the learning process and allow each student to build on their learning and identify as well as address any misconceptions regarding the course content (Van der Kleij et al., 2017). These online discussion boards replicate the lively discussions that occur in face-to-face classrooms where verbal responses and visual cues provide a student with meaningful feedback.

During an online discussion, both the instructor and students lead the active dialogue. While this dialogue is occurring, the instructor and student responses serve as feedback that is critical *throughout* the active discussion thread versus having to wait until *after* the completion of the discussion to receive meaningful feedback. Online discussion feedback is a social act, a dialogue with and among the students and not a set of independent comments (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). This feedback reinforces exemplary student performance and guides each student toward a stronger discussion contribution as the active discussion unfolds.

Course Assessments

A frequent tactic for generating course feedback to students by novice online instructors is to utilize the automatic scoring of true/false, matching, and multiple-choice exams. With this feature, a score is immediately generated by the online program and provided to the student when the exam or assess-

ment is submitted. This approach to classroom assessment feedback is limited and does not provide the candidate with the meaningful feedback needed to promote academic growth.

Rather, a course assessment in an online course should provide a candidate with feedback that delivers guidance (written or oral) to the student in order to improve their learning. The level of written or oral feedback provided should give candidates the opportunity to identify and address misconceptions they had on the course material and metacognitively engage the student with the feedback to develop strategies to improve their learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Instructors who use the course assessment feature can enhance its usefulness in promoting learning by incorporating strategies such as an online discussion following each exam or assessment. Again, this focused dialogue can pinpoint misconceptions and redirect or clarify student understandings. Each of these quick assessments provide the instructor the opportunity to authentically assess student understanding and provide immediate feedback as well as allow the learner to assess their own progress and understanding of the material.

Many students and instructors find online learning intimidating because of the perceived isolated nature of the learning environment. They do not feel an online course can provide the sense of community and connectedness that comes with a face-to-face classroom setting. Contrary to this belief, comradery can still exist in an online learning environment by providing authentic assessment that lead to meaningful feedback throughout the course (Rottmann & Rabidoux, 2017). Whether in an individual or group discussion, activity, assignment, or assessment, or course exam, feedback is a crucial component in the online learning environment.

The course instructor and students can utilize written or verbal feedback through a variety of approaches within an online learning management system. The related resources listed at the end of this chapter, available to both the student and instructors, are an avenue for providing meaningful feedback through verbal and video platforms. These resources focus on the use of video and audio to engage students and instructors in conversation *about* feedback. These active and focused dialogues add to the course, which in turn allows both students and teachers to work collaboratively to develop meaning (Hawe & Parr, 2014). This dialogue impacts how effective online teachers structure learning interactions and the feedback with and among students that involves the students as an active agent in the feedback process (Clark, 2012). The key element of feedback is to provide meaningful comments, questions, and dialogue to develop a student's ability to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning (Nichol, 2010; Price et al. 2010).

CONCLUSION

Returning to the vignette provided in the introduction, effective online instruction can alleviate fears faced by many students taking online courses. As Bailey returned to school to complete her professional education coursework, her apprehensions related to learning in an online platform were soon no longer a problem. She quickly found the written and verbal feedback provided on her online assignments, discussions, and assessments by the course instructor and the written feedback she received from her classmates through online discussions, created a beneficial, learning environment much like what she found when attending a brick-and-mortar classroom. Through the clear assessments and focused feedback, which was more than a final grade or score, Bailey discovered that she could self-reflect and grow in her understanding of the knowledge presented in the course and found herself motivated and engaged in the learning process.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. How do you ensure you are meeting the academic needs of your online students when assessing them and providing feedback to each student for required online discussions?
2. How do you assess your students and provide meaningful feedback to an online student after the student completes an assignment or assessment through your learning management system?
3. What is your aspiration for integrating meaningful feedback into your online course(s)?
4. Based on the learning management system at your institution, what audio or video approaches will you use to provide your students with meaningful feedback?

RELATED RESOURCES

Resources for Written, Audio, or Video Feedback (adapted from Rottmann & Rabidoux, 2017)

- Jing (<https://www.techsmith.com/jing.html>) allows the instructor to screen capture a student submission or write instructor comments within the assignment submission and provide verbal feedback to the student in a video format.
- Vocaroo (<https://vocaroo.com/>) is an audio podcast approach to providing verbal, meaningful feedback to the student through comments about the

submission from the student. A recording link for playback is then linked with the final submission grade provided to the student.

- VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com>) is a resource that allows students and instructors to provide written, verbal, and/or video feedback within the learning management system.
- Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) is a videoconferencing platform that allows instructors and students to conference online for virtual feedback, engage in discussion over assignments, and to clarify content, instructions, and questions. This feedback platform is effective in providing social presence in an online learning environment.

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