

Student Feedback Matters—and It Goes Beyond Grading

by David Gooblar

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It's unfortunate but true that the majority of the feedback we give students on their work takes the form of grades. This is unfortunate because most instructors view the task of grading student work as a form of drudgery slightly more pleasant than filling out a tax return. When I wrote in this space, last month, about the benefits of frequent, low-stakes testing, I worried that carrying out my suggestion—by giving students tests as often as every class period—would result in an avalanche of marking, an untenable addition to instructors' already-heavy workloads.

But grading isn't going to go away anytime soon, alas. So it's worth trying to think differently about this hated part of our work lives.

It's important to distinguish, as educational researchers have, between two types of motivations we have for assessing students. The first (and more typical) way of thinking about why we grade students is referred to as *summative assessment*. This attempts to measure students' progress to see how well they have learned the material. Summative assessment is a judgment, an indication of how the instructor thinks a student has performed. It's a necessary evil, often required to make students—and instructors—externally accountable.

In contrast to summative assessment is *formative assessment*, which is aimed not at measuring past performance, but at influencing future performance. The idea of formative assessment

acknowledges that the feedback we give students has strong effects on how they conduct themselves in our courses. Giving thoughtful feedback on student work allows students to develop into independent learners, able to accurately track their own progress (or lack thereof) and adjust their approaches accordingly.

A recent blog post by Mark Salisbury, assistant dean and director of institutional research and assessment at Augustana College (where I have taught as an adjunct), in Illinois, offers thought-provoking support for the effectiveness of formative assessment. Mark and his team noticed that students often complained that they didn't receive enough feedback from instructors until late in the term. So they inserted a new question into their freshman surveys: "I had access to my grades and other feedback early enough in the term to adjust my study habits or seek help as necessary." (This is one of those questions that isn't a question; students signal their level of agreement with the statement on a five-point scale.)

The responses fell on a fairly typical bell curve, with relatively even distribution of answers among the five choices, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." But here's what was most interesting to me: The answers to this "early feedback" question correlated with the answers to several other ones.

Those students who felt that they received useful feedback early enough to do something about it were more likely to feel that their interactions with professors in general had a positive effect on their progress. They were also more likely to think that faculty members treated them like individuals. And here's the best part: The more strongly students agreed with the early feedback statement, the more likely they were to say that they worked harder to meet their instructors' expectations.

It's a small sample size, but the implication is clear: If students are given a chance to monitor their progress in a class, they may actually put more effort into that class.

Now, I'm not sure that we should all take our syllabi and cram them full of tests and assignments just to make sure we're offering a sufficient amount of feedback. But it's worth thinking about the ways our students benefit from hearing about their progress, especially early on in the term.

Research suggests that the quality of feedback is perhaps the most important factor in determining whether formative assessment will actually be formative. So while giving out grades is a start, it's even more important to let students know where they've gone wrong and how they can improve.

It makes sense that students who are given an indication of what's expected of them—and of how their work has measured up—would be more motivated to work hard to improve. Keep this in mind the next time you're marking a big batch of student papers. I'm not saying that this will turn grading into a pleasurable activity, but maybe it can feel a little less like busywork and a little more like, well, teaching.

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