Giving Students Feedback
by Emily O. Gravett

Over the last 15 years, I've spent an exorbitant amount of
time giving feedback to students on their work (not to mention devoting significant time in class to peer-review processes). This process began when I was a graduate student at the University of Virginia, teaching intro writing courses for the English Department. Those classes were small, the writing load was intense, and the students were expected to gain basic skills in writing (argumentation, style, etc.) that would carry them through the rest of their college career. I would spend hours offering students detailed feedback on their essays—marginal comments and copy edits (aack!)—only to find the very same problems showing up the next time around. It was totally aggravating.

This challenge has stayed with me, in some form, in the years since, as I began teaching my own religion courses, while still at UVA, then in my first job at Trinity University, and now here, at JMU. I am convinced of the utility, even the necessity, of offering students feedback (how else will they know how to improve for the future unless guided in some way?), yet, I am not always convinced that this feedback achieves its intended effect.

From the literature on feedback over the years, I've taken away several key points:
- Students feel stress and anxiety about feedback, especially from their peers (e.g., Cartney 2012);
- Students do not always collect feedback, when given the choice (e.g., Sinclair and Cleland, 2007);
- Students do not always understand the feedback they receive (e.g., Brown 2007);
- Students may get overwhelmed by feedback that is too long, too complex, or simply too plentiful (e.g., Shute 2008);
- Students do not always act upon feedback, even if they do value receiving it (e.g., Brown and Glover, 2019);
- Students do not necessarily know *how* to take what they have learned from the feedback and apply it (e.g., Jonsson 2012); and
- Students may perceive that implementing feedback doesn't pay off (Winstone et al., 2016).

I, like others (e.g., Crisp 2007), have come to conclude that *feedback alone, from the instructor or peers, is insufficient to effect better work by students.* So, how can we ensure that the time we devote to feedback is not wasted and that students are receiving the guidance necessary to help them improve?

I've tried a variety of strategies over the years, each with its pros and cons:
- I include a "revision" category on my assignment rubrics, which says something like, for the A-level expectations: "The paper avoids mistakes found in previous paper(s); any prior feedback received was clearly used to draft and finalize this paper." It is unclear to me how much students take this row seriously, however—or even read it! (Then we're back to the original problem....)

- I have required (and have [written](#) about requiring) students to add numbered footnotes to their revisions, explaining how the feedback they received from their peers (in this case, though I could easily do it with my own feedback too) informed their final draft in specific places. This only works in cases where students are submitting drafts and then final versions that, presumably, won't change so much that it makes sense to incorporate footnotes.
- I have scheduled appointments at various times during the semester with students to discuss their work-in-progress and to find out about their plans for improvement, in part explicitly based on what they're learning from any feedback they've received.
- I have required students to submit previous drafts or even other work along with their current work to suggest to them that these are all connected. At this point in my career, I ask students to submit their work to me digitally, on Canvas, and I let them know the reason for this submission type is because I want to have my own copy of their work, so that I can look back and see how they're taking my feedback into consideration and improving.
- I've asked students to write cover letters with their work, explaining what feedback seemed most important to them to incorporate and how they did so in the current submission.
- After experimenting with offering short video feedback on papers, I've polled students on the efficacy of that mode and their preferences for receiving feedback. In a roundabout way, this lets me know that they've actually interacted with the feedback, but it's not a guarantee.
- I've devoted time, in class, for students to read over feedback they've received, to make notes on that feedback, and to create an action plan on what to do about it in the future. I then have had them turn in these notes and action plan with their final product.

What strategies have you tried, to ensure that not only are students making changes based on feedback they receive (from you and/or others), but that they are even *reviewing* the feedback in the first place? We'd be glad to talk with you about your ideas and challenges through a [CFI teaching consultation](#) or at the upcoming [Giving](#) Feedback [workshop](#) on December 1!

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