Inside Independent Learning

Special points of interest:

- Teaching Through Feedback
    - Understandable
    - Three points
    - Supportive, Useful, Detailed
- D2L Gem: Sending Emails
- Good Practice Reminder: Leaving Feedback for Exams
- UW Distance Learning Conference
- Introducing: Irena Fraczek
- Next Month: Fall Topic Series: Getting the most out of D2L

"Student-instructor interaction is one of the most critical factors in enhancing student satisfaction in an online course." Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland (2012)
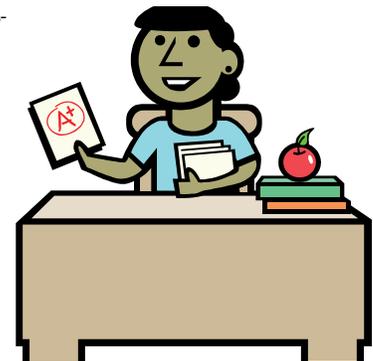
Teaching Through Feedback

In a face-to-face classroom, there is no doubt about the teaching role: Students go to class to listen to and learn from their instructors. Homework is assigned to help students prepare for lectures or to check their comprehension of course content. Grading assignments may be rudimentary, and can serve the purpose of alerting the instructor when more class time needs to be awarded to a difficult topic.

In asynchronous Independent Learning, the classroom is replaced by study notes and reading assignments. Homework is completed independently and turned in for assessment. How does the act of teaching fit in to this educational model? Assignment feedback in Independent Learning courses constitutes a teachable moment. Careful considera-tion of student work allows instructors the opportunity to engage in the act of teaching and to guide student learning.

Read on for ideas about crafting effective teaching feedback, based on recent research.

Understandable Feedback

In a 2001 article, M. Hunt defined feedback as the process of closing "the gap between the actual and the desired levels of performance" (p. 173). Students begin courses with different levels of abilities, expertise, and experience. Through the course, Instructors guide student learning so all students can complete the learning objectives of the course.

Crafting feedback that students can easily understand is one key component of teaching in an asynchronous learning environment. In her 2013 article, Kerry Earl notes that "[p]ersonalizing feedback through language choice, level of explanation given and amount of praise in feedback [should] vary with a teacher's understanding of student needs and ability" (164).

Studies have shown that students cannot understand feedback that is written above their current levels of comprehension. Therefore, effective teaching feedback is pitched to the current comprehension level of each individual student.

Students also cannot understand feedback that does not appear to be useful. Effective feedback addresses the current topic or skill, offering corrections as needed, and points the student toward a useful application. Will the student need to know or do something with the information on future assignments? On the exams? Providing students with a concrete future use of the course content can make the feedback more comprehensible because the student can clearly see how the feedback is useful.

Continuing Studies
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Three Points: Most Important Topic(s) First

"Be sure to follow the 5 paragraph essay format when writing your essay responses."

At times, it seems that student work is so riddled with mistakes and errors, it is difficult to know what to comment on.

Students also struggle to know which parts of the instructor feedback are the most important. This can result in students ignoring the most important instructor comments.

Restricting your feedback to three key points can help the student identify the most important comments. In addition, instructors can order feedback so that the most important topics are discussed first. This underscores for students what they should focus on first.

At times, more than three key points will be necessary when crafting effective feedback. In these cases, it can be helpful to separate the corrections from the suggestions for future improvement.

Placing the corrections in a word document allows instructors to make all corrections and comments that are needed to an assignment. Instructors can then use the feedback box in the D2L dropbox or the iStudy Access "Comments to the Student" area to give students three concrete suggestions about how to improve future work.

Supportive, Useful, Detailed

"Proof your essay for spelling and grammar issues. You can use the spelling and grammar tools in Microsoft Word."

"Assessment is essentially something teachers should do *with* students rather that *to* student" (Earl, 163).

Assessment, according to Crooks (1988), is an experience that impacts students socially, emotionally, and cognitively. It can lead to enhancing or inhibiting a student's confidence, self-esteem, and motivation for completing the course. Because, as White (2003) explains, "Feedback plays a critical role for distance ... learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement, and motivation to continue" (187), effective use of feedback is especially important in Independent Learning courses.

In addition to being timely, effective teaching feedback is supportive, useful, and detailed.

Supportive feedback acknowledges the student as a learner with individual goals, strengths, and weaknesses. It comments on the progress the student has made so far, and encourages the student to persevere in the course. Supportive feedback also offers the student the opportunity to ask the instructor for help or to ask course content questions via email or the discussion board.

Useful feedback speaks to the student in a way that the student can understand. It helps the student grow in his or her understanding of the course material and guides the student toward future learning.

Detailed Feedback directly comments on the student's work. It addresses things that went well in the work and points out progress that has been made. It also points out areas of needed improvement and offers additional explanation and/or outside resources. Detailed feedback also gives the student concrete suggestions for future learning and improvement.

By crafting feedback that is supportive, useful, and detailed, Independent Learning instructors express interest in the individual student, which leads to increased student retention and motivation in asynchronous courses.

"[A]ssessment is not a thing or an event, but rather a continuous relational encounter that draws upon teachers' and students' sensibilities in terms of their noticing and valuing" (Gilles and Earl, 4).

D2L Gem: sending emails to students through D2L

At times Independent Learning Instructors may need to contact their students via email. Instead of wasting time looking up the student email or clicking between D2L and an external email program, instructors can use D2L's email function to communicate with their students. To use this email function, click on the student's name in either the dropbox or the classlist. This will open up a D2L email window with the student's email address already in the "to" field. Instructors can even set a standard closing to emails so they do not have to spend time typing out a closing with their name and title. In the email settings area, an instructor can set a standard email signature, set the "reply to" email address, and even elect to have a copy of each outgoing message sent to the instructor's email address for instructional records.

Good Practice Reminder: Leaving Exam Feedback

Independent Learning used exam reports in the past to provide students with feedback on their exam performance. Because most IL courses now use D2L, these exam reports are no longer the most effective way to provide students with feedback on their exam performance.

Instead of completing exam reports, instructors using D2L should leave exam feedback for students in the Grades Tab section of their D2L course(s).

Exam feedback, especially midterm exam feedback, is important for students who may adjust their study habits to be more efficient for the second half of the course. It is also especially important to leave comprehensible feedback with 1-3 suggestions about how to improve performance on exams for students who

do not live in the Madison area. Many IL students do not live close enough to Madison to stop by the DCS offices and spend a half hour reviewing their final exam. Using the D2L Grades Tab exam feedback function is the best way to provide useful feedback to these distance learners.

Instructors who are accustomed to providing students with final grade reports will also be happy to note that the Grades Tab in D2L shows students how their final grades are calculated. There is also a place to enter student specific final grades comments.

If you have questions about how to leave exam or course feedback in D2L, please email Sarah or see the how-to document that was sent out earlier this month.

Tips from the UW Distance Teaching & Learning Conference

August 12-14 marked the 30th Annual UW Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning at the Monona Terrace in Madison. The following is a sampling of tips and hints about distance teaching from this year's conference.

Students can only hear feedback that is pitched to their current abilities.

For asynchronous courses, assignment feedback as an opportunity to teach.

The *Gutenberg Project* is a source for free electronic text copies for books that have expired copyrights. This can be a great resource for instructors of literature courses.

Ginkgotree is a virtual textbook rental option for texts and textbooks. Students pay an access fee, and Ginkgotree takes care of all copyright issues. This product can be especially useful to instructors who use excerpts from several different textbooks.

When teaching asynchronous courses, the instructor role is much more "Guide on the Side." When teaching synchronous, face-to-face courses, the instructor role is "Sage on the Stage."

Adding a brief video that introduces the instructor can personalize the course experience for students.

USING AUDIO AND VIDEO RECORDINGS AND UPLOADING THESE RECORDING FILES TO THE D2L DROPBOX CAN MAKE FEEDBACK MORE PERSONAL AND EFFICIENT.

Students need to know how to use feedback in order for feedback to be useful.

When students think that their instructor cares, they tend to perform better in the course.

In order to craft useful feedback, instructors need to develop a picture of their student. Effective feedback looks different to students of differing ages groups and experience levels.

Learners in asynchronous and distance learning courses need to be empowered through instructor feedback to take responsibility for the majority of their learning.

Ideas & Suggestions

Remember, if you have any questions or concerns that you think would be of interest to your IL colleagues, please submit them for future IL News Letters.

Coming Next Month: The Fall Topic Series

Because all IL courses will soon be offered in D2L, the fall topic series is dedicated to Getting the Most out of D2L.

October: D2L Basics

November: Effective Use of Discussion Boards

December: "chats"

January: Assessments and Quiz Tools

If you have any helpful tips or hints that you would like to share with your IL colleagues, please be sure to let Sarah know by October 15. If you have any questions about D2L that you would like to see addressed in the Fall Topic Series, just let Sarah know.

Introducing: Irena Fraczek

I have been the instructor for two science courses (Environmental Conservation and Global Physical Environments) for over two decades. My first teaching experiences were in the classroom setting: first, a few months as a substitute science teacher in the elementary school, and then, five different courses as a teaching assistant in Geography Department (UW-Madison). The latter was an unforgettable experience since these courses required me to evaluate graphic designs and master the fine art of grading computer programs.

A few years after starting my work for Independent Learning, I participated in the earliest efforts on the path to electronic transition and the Environmental Conservation was among the first UW courses available online. To my delight, this exciting phase of educational evolution was also beneficial for the environment through the potential for reducing paper waste

(unfortunately, paper is still the largest component of the US landfills).

My interests in preserving environmental quality and interactions between the natural and cultural world have matured during the MS degree program completed at the University of Warsaw, Poland. The breadth of this program was noteworthy as it in-

cluded all subfields of Earth Science (air, water, rocks and life forms), human geography (people, economics, politics, and technology), mapping and fundamentals of educational science. My subsequent studies at the UW-Madison zeroed on the visual processing of spatial knowledge and included a minor program in cognitive psychology and computer science.

The interests in anything environmental and visual information processing have combined naturally in my passion for photography and love for outdoor activities (skiing, hiking and travel). Whether in the nearby Devil's Lake Park, or some faraway country, it's always thrilling to seek and document any manifestations of biological, ecological and/or cultural diversity. These are extensively explored in my courses since in my view, preserving them is the key to our sustainable future.