Improving Feedback to Students in Online Courses

WANDA BONNEL

described as one of seven core teaching principles in undergraduate and online education (1,2), feedback from faculty can be a way to keep students engaged and help them gain skill proficiency and apply concepts in diverse contexts. However, while feedback is understood to be important, faculty teaching online courses often express concern about the time required to provide feedback and question whether or not the feedback they do provide is meaningful to students. As teaching patterns evolve in the online environment, efficient and effective feedback practices are needed. • Online classes are often perceived by students as less intimidating than the traditional classroom (3), and undergraduates have reacted favorably to learning with technology and its text-based communication focus (4). However, little is known about the effectiveness of specific teaching and learning approaches in online nursing education. Certain challenges are known to exist. For example, students have described feeling abandoned in online courses, and lack of feedback can lead to student procrastination or even course failure (5). • How is feedback best provided to nursing students who are taking online courses? This article describes efficient strategies grouped into three categories: course design, faculty roles, and student participation. The Sidebar includes a summary of strategies in these categories.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FEEDBACK FOR STUDENTS

In a classic reference, Instructional Message Design, Fleming and Levine (6) refer to feedback as “knowledge of results.” Feedback has been described as a communication process in which a person asks questions or clarifies information to promote understanding (7). Thurmond and Wambach (8) described feedback in online education as including information exchange between the student and instructor about course activity that would lead to student learning.

For the purposes of this article, feedback is defined as communication of information to the student (based on assessment of a learning task) that helps the student reflect on the information, construct self-knowledge relevant to learning, and set further learning goals (3,9-15). Feedback, building on assessment, allows students to gauge their progress, consider alternate learning strategies, and project their own continued learning needs. For feedback to be successful, students must reflect on and interact with the communicated information, thus taking an active role in their own learning.

There is general agreement about the importance of feedback. For example, the National League for Nursing, in its Core Competencies for Nurse Educators (16), addresses faculty competence in providing timely, constructive, and thoughtful feedback to learners. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (17) summarized the need for some type of response from

ABSTRACT

This article describes evidence-based strategies that are efficient for providing feedback to students in online courses. Strategies are grouped in categories including course design, faculty roles, and student participation. Integrating diverse feedback methods into course design is a way to promote efficiency in online courses while allowing students to acquire and learn professional skills such as self-reflection and peer review.

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faculty so that individuals will trust that someone else is “out there” and interested. Feedback helps overcome isolation and reassures students that they are completing assignments according to course and faculty expectations (18). Thurmond (12) noted that feedback is important for helping students maintain pace and schedule in the online classroom.

**Timing and Frequency of Feedback in Online Courses**

While rich and rapid feedback in online courses is considered a standard (1), guidelines specific to providing feedback are lacking. In the online, asynchronous setting, students and teachers are not engaged in the course at the same time, and the verbal and nonverbal feedback students typically receive from faculty is absent (19). But technology does allow for frequent feedback and can provide quick methods of communicating with students (20). Moreover, students easily receive feedback from peers and colleagues as well as teachers, providing efficient means for students to reflect, revise materials, and achieve at higher levels.

The timing of feedback can be considered from several perspectives, including frequency, specific points of time during the semester (19), and the merits of delayed versus immediate feedback. Vella (21) discussed the need for feedback sequencing, such as sequencing a course project into components and providing formative feedback at scheduled points so that students have opportunities to improve. While immediate feedback may be appreciated, questions remain. How often do students need or want feedback from faculty? What is the best timing to reinforce learning? Cobb et al. (20) discussed the need to help students understand when they should expect responses from faculty.

**Types of Feedback in Online Courses**

Graham and colleagues (22), in an evaluation of online courses, considered two types of feedback: acknowledgment (providing recognition) and informational (providing factual information). A study by Oehikers and Gibson (23) showed that students in online courses appreciated emotional support from faculty as well as help with problem solving. Social interaction literature specific to online distance education supports affective approaches, such as using students’ names, building a sense of community, and providing encouragement (24). Diekelmann and Mendias (25) emphasize that in order to create a safe, fair, and respectful place for learning in online courses, teachers need to reflect on the meanings and significance of their responses to students.
In text-based feedback communication, the format, the tone, and the quality of the message are all important (11). Even in a simple email communication the format of the message may help students focus and easily access information; for example, a bulleted list can be used in place of a broad, lengthy narrative. The tone of the message is important as constructive comments can have a positive impact on motivation. The message needs to be relevant, responsive, accurate, and congruent with the learning task. These diverse perspectives suggest the need for thoughtful consideration of text-based feedback to students.

**The Impact of Feedback** Within the Billings model (18), best teaching practices correspond to positive outcomes of student learning and course satisfaction. Miller and Corley (5), in a study of 53 online undergraduates, found a relationship between email feedback about course progress and the amount of time students spent working on online course activities. In a qualitative study specific to learning patterns of 64 online undergraduates, students noted that frequent communication and prompt feedback from the instructor contributed most to their learning (26).

Student satisfaction with online courses has also been related to feedback. Soon, Sook, Jung, and Im surveyed 60 nursing students and found insufficient faculty feedback to be a detractor to the online course (27). Thurmond et al. (13), reporting on a survey of 120 nursing students, found a strong correlation between email feedback and student satisfaction. Benchmark studies of multiple schools and courses have related the concept of student satisfaction to course feedback (28,29).

Different types of courses present different types of feedback needs. Fink (30) noted that learners’ interests, goals, processes, and outcomes vary in different learning communities. And expectations and preferences of both feedback providers and receivers influence perceptions and actions.

Bonnel, Ludwig, and Smith (31) broadly summarized variables influencing online course practices to include types of courses taught and intended objectives (e.g., clinical vs. theory courses or basic core content vs. specialized content); course and program levels (e.g., graduate vs. undergraduate); and course sizes and student characteristics. Limited information exists as to how best practices in online education may vary for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for different generations of students (32).

**Strategies for Optimizing Feedback Opportunities** When teaching online courses, there are numerous ways to achieve course objectives and to provide feedback. Strategies for optimizing these opportunities are grouped in three categories: course design, faculty roles, and student participation. (See Sidebar.)

**COURSE DESIGN** When structuring online courses, feedback needs to be part of the teaching plan. The early literature on online education focused exclusively on faculty as providers of feedback. But a qualitative survey involving 72 students by Bonnel et al. (31) found that students recognized good feedback as more than comments from the instructor. Students affirmed that strategies such as group feedback, automated feedback, peer feedback, and self-reflection were useful resources for learning. They commented that they valued critiques and suggestions from peers as well as instructors.

Good feedback is more likely to happen if a positive learning environment is created and numerous opportunities for feedback are part of the course. Palloff and Pratt (33) found that students gained richer collaborative learning experiences through reflection and interaction with others in the online learning community. Designing a course with the course goals in mind allows for natural integration of feedback and attention to learning (14,30,34).

Once course goals and assignments are identified, numerous ways to provide feedback can be implemented. For example, automated quizzes can capture key themes and remind students of important points from assigned readings. Group activities, such as collaborative assignments and online discussions, provide peer feedback opportunities. Faculty use of rubrics can promote timely, detailed feedback, encourage critical thinking, and facilitate student/faculty communication (35). Diverse approaches to assignments (and feedback) can help meet diverse student learning styles (36).

**FACULTY ROLES** Students value feedback that reports their progress, encourages them, recognizes their efforts, and provides guidance (31). Sitzman and Leners (37) found that feed-
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back conveyed to students that faculty cared. Personalizing and crafting respectful, text-based communication provides opportunities for faculty to acknowledge and encourage students.

As facilitators of learning, faculty can guide students in setting learning goals complementary to course goals and help them obtain feedback from many resources. They can orient and coach students in feedback-seeking behaviors and expectations, providing cues for self-reflection and guided activities to promote peer exchange. They can also help students understand why certain concepts, such as such as self-assessment and peer review, are important and how they can take best advantage of these opportunities (30).

Vella (21) noted that mutual student and faculty accountability are part of adult learning. Feedback is provided to keep the student group on task and acknowledge the learning community’s accomplishments. Summary feedback delivered to the entire class, for example, a synthesis of common themes from a discussion, can reinforce what the learning community has accomplished. Faculty might also summarize results of test scores and highlight topical problem areas requiring further study. Individualized feedback, based on a template and provided at set times during the semester (such as during intense student project work), can encourage and guide students.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION Just as faculty roles change in online education, students also take on new learner roles and responsibilities. As members of an online learning community, students become active participants in providing feedback via online discussions and group work. As faculty and students partner in providing and receiving feedback, students acquire professional skills such as self-reflection and peer review. Active participation in feedback is consistent with active learning principles and helps promote critical thinking (30).

Students’ responsibilities in course feedback are diverse. Student roles include seeking feedback when needed; gaining self-evaluation skills; and learning how to provide peer evaluation. Birch (19) noted that students need to be knowledgeable about seeking feedback from both faculty and peers. Successful online learners can acknowledge the type of feedback they need relevant to the course and determine how to attain it (38).

Specific to student self-evaluation, Bain (15) noted that unless students are able to judge the quality of their own work, they have not really learned. Self-assessment can serve as an intrinsic motivator (14,39,40). Wiggins and McTighe (14) noted that an isolated learning activity does not lead to understanding, but that reflection on the activity helps promote understanding.

Palloff and Pratt (33) noted that students do not inherently know how to provide good feedback to their peers and urged instructors to model, teach, and encourage this process. Simple rubrics can be used to guide peer critiques. As students compare colleagues’ work to a rubric and reflect on their own work, they will develop better products themselves. Participating in feedback helps students attain needed competencies and gain skills for the future.

Good feedback helps students reflect on information, construct self-knowledge, and set further learning goals. Feedback can be provided at multiple times and in multiple ways to students, but if students do not read the feedback they receive and consider their own responses to it, the process has no value. Students act on feedback by revising their work and expanding their knowledge of content and process (36). As students make course connections, they further their critical thinking skills (41). And, as a part of course feedback, students are prompted to consider what is next and create ongoing learning plans.

Conclusion All courses are not created equal for good feedback, but a purposeful approach to feedback in course design can bring about new learning opportunities. Explicit thinking about each assignment specific to course outcomes sets the stage for student learning.

As part of an online learning community, students and teachers take on new educational partnerships. When feedback is incorporated into the course design, students gain new skills involving self-reflection and peer review that will be useful in future endeavors. Opportunities for learning are limited if faculty consider themselves as lone feedback providers.

Further research on best practices in providing feedback in the online environment is needed. Questions might include: What feedback strategies are most effective and efficient for varied student groups and courses? What selected teaching/learning strategies best contribute to peer critique? In specified courses, are there windows of opportunity when feedback is most important? As technology enhancements and synchronous educational opportunities become more available, these questions can be extended.

About the Author Wanda Bonnel, PhD, RN, is an associate professor at the University of Kansas School of Nursing, Kansas City. Contact Dr. Bonnel at wbonnel@kumc.edu.

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