Providing Written Feedback

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What is the Purpose of Providing Feedback?

Assessment of student performance is only part of the reason for students to complete assignments or other coursework. An important component that should not be overlooked is the student’s learning experience. Written feedback provides an avenue by which students can learn from their work.

How does Written Feedback Facilitate Learning?

Although assignments are typically graded using a letter or percentage system, grading on its own is largely evaluative. Written feedback is complementary to the evaluative process. Its main role in the assessment process is to facilitate student learning. There are two primary ways that written feedback helps to facilitate student learning:

- Written feedback provides concrete explanations for grades received. The student has an opportunity to reflect on and understand the specific reasons for their current level of achievement (grades).
- Written feedback provides a bridge from current performance to future performance by allowing students to understand how they are performing now, and how they can improve performance on their next assessment, whether in the same course or a different course. They can use the feedback to reflect on their current work, examine how constructive feedback might have changed or improved the current work, and then use this feedback in the future.

How to Provide Effective Written Feedback

Effective feedback has a number of components.

- Start by providing positive feedback on something that was done well. By definition, reinforcement is any consequence that serves to increase a given behaviour. The goal of positive feedback is to serve as a reinforcer that will maintain or increase the occurrence of whatever was done well. Accordingly, it is important to find something to reinforce, regardless of the overall quality of the paper. Even if the paper needs a lot of overall improvement on its core components, positive feedback can be provided on factors such as the good effort put forth or coming up with a unique or interesting way of looking at the topic.
- Secondly, present feedback on areas where the student can improve. This feedback should be constructive rather than critical. Critical feedback is judgmental and negative, and may leave the student feeling demoralized and unsure of how to improve. Constructive feedback on the other hand is descriptive rather than evaluative, explains concretely what aspects could be improved and why, and provides specific ways that these areas could be strengthened. Similar to the positive feedback, all students should be given some constructive feedback, regardless of the overall quality of the paper. Even
very high quality papers that exceed expectations for the assignment can be given feedback for improvement, even if that feedback is above the year level for the course. This will allow above-average students to continue to develop and refine their skills.

- Feedback should focus on both specific content-related requirements as well as stylistic areas such as writing style or presenting style.
- Additionally, feedback can be provided on specific elements of the assignment throughout, as well as overall feedback on the work as a whole.

**Examples of Feedback**

Following are three examples of feedback for the same assignment at three levels of achievement (below average, average, and above average). The assignment is a paper for a third-year psychology course. The assignment instructions were to choose a psychological disorder and present an argument about the etiology of this disorder from a biopsychosocial perspective, using academic literature to substantiate the argument. The assignment had the following learning outcomes:

By the end of this assignment students will be able to:

- Accurately define and describe the central components of a selected psychological disorder.
- Articulate an argument about the etiology of the disorder from a biopsychosocial perspective.
- Use research evidence from a variety of academic sources to substantiate the argument about etiology.

In this example, the student wrote a paper on the biopsychosocial etiology of bulimia nervosa.

**Feedback for Below Average Paper (D grade)**

- You put a good effort into considering the etiology of bulimia nervosa. Your paper focused on the role of the thin ideal as an important factor, and the Stice et al article was a good scholarly reference to support your argument. However, by focusing only on a social factor, the etiology of bulimia is not discussed from a biopsychosocial perspective, which we have discussed in the course as an important framework for understanding psychological disorders. In order to improve this paper, it would be helpful, in addition to the thin ideal (which is a social factor), to consider a biological factor (e.g., genetics) and a psychological factor (e.g., impulsivity) that could interact with the thin ideal to influence the development of bulimia. This would help to strengthen the paper’s content and argument. In addition, the structure of your paper is somewhat disorganized. It would be helpful to include headings and to break your sections into smaller, more focused paragraphs, in order to help the reader follow your arguments more easily. As well, it looks like you didn’t use APA style to format your paper or reference list, so next time consulting the APA Publication Manual for formatting would be a good strategy.

**Feedback for Average Paper (C+ grade)**

You did a great job considering three important factors that contribute to the biopsychosocial development of bulimia. Specifically, you addressed biological (genetics), psychological (impulsivity), and social factors (thin ideal) that all play a role in the etiology of this disorder, and the articles you used were consistent with this. One area that could be improved is a greater integration of these concepts. Although your paper discusses the three factors, it would be strengthened by considering how these factors interact together. For example, how do genetics and impulsivity interact? How does the thin ideal affect someone who is already genetically vulnerable to eating disorders? By integrating the areas, your paper would become more cohesively “biopsychosocial”. Additionally, although your paper is generally well-structured and easy to follow, there are some occurrences of run-on sentences and some misuse of verb tenses. Breaking up longer sentences into shorter, more focused sentences, and carefully proofreading to ensure that verb tenses stay consistent will help to improve your overall writing quality. Your APA formatting generally looks good but there are some errors in the reference list (e.g., doi numbers are missing), so be attentive to the manual.

Feedback for Above Average Paper (A grade)

You did an excellent job presenting a biopsychosocial argument about the etiology of bulimia nervosa. One strength of your paper was the way you synthesized the three areas (biological, psychological, and social) to explain the interactions and transactions between these factors. You also made good use of the literature to support these arguments. One way that your paper could be even further strengthened would be to make an explicit statement about the complexity of these relationships and that the etiology of bulimia is multifactorial and includes many factors from each of the three categories. Although this is somewhat implicit in your paper, it could be stated more explicitly. In addition, your writing style is very strong and helps to make your argument very convincing. You can improve your writing further by making more use of transition phrases at the start of new paragraphs in order to increase the flow from one topic to the next.

References

