

## **What do you mean you never got any feedback?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Students are continuously using their cell phones, iPads and text or video messaging services to obtain instant feedback on virtually every aspect of their lives. This mindset of gaining an immediate response to questions asked translates into the classroom environment as well. Although online learning and virtual classes offer students freedom from traditional classroom constraints, the need for constructive and immediate feedback on assignments continues to be a main focus for online students. Over a period of one year, this study focused on learning the perceptions of students to detailed instructor feedback on online assignments, how they wanted to receive that feedback and how satisfied they were with the feedback provided by the instructor. Learning the kind of feedback students perceive as beneficial will assist the online instructor to provide comprehensive and constructive feedback that promotes the realization of participative goals, engages students and enhances learning. Results of this study and implications for further research will be shared.

Keywords: Online courses, feedback, student perceptions of instructor feedback, distance learning

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When instruction is completed in a brick and mortar classroom setting, feedback is not only relatively easy to provide to students but it is also immediate. By observing a student's body language and non-verbal clues, the instructor can immediately perceive the types of questions that might be asked by the student and feedback can be provided and modified as needed. If additional information is needed, it can continue to be given until the instructor is certain that the student is clear on the concept being taught. Online courses do not provide these same clues because communication may be asynchronous and lacking in non-verbal richness (Ladyshevsky, 2013). What might be achieved easily in the classroom becomes more challenging in the online environment. However, one advantage is that "online learning allows everyone to participate equally, unlike the classroom where three or four may dominate a discussion based on their verbal ability or their presence" (AACSB, 1998). With these caveats, an online instructor needs to not only consider the design and descriptive elements to provide for their courses but also must afford opportunities that will provide assignments feedback that build on one another until the objectives for the course are achieved. So feedback takes on a wider variety of dimensions with online instruction than with face-to-face instruction.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this research was to obtain student perceptions about instructor-provided feedback on their online assignments. The first section describes the student's perception to the feedback and how they used that feedback in future assignments. The second section discusses the types of feedback students preferred on assignments and the third section discovers the student's perceptions of the usefulness of the feedback on future assignments. The last section reviews how satisfied students were with the overall feedback.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Merriam-Webster (2013) defines feedback as "helpful information or criticism that is given to someone to say what can be done to improve a performance, product, etc." whereas Kepner (1991) defines feedback as "any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong." Within the educational arena, feedback acknowledges the progress students have made towards achieving learning outcomes. In order for it to be effective, Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997) suggest feedback is "timely, perceived as relevant, meaningful and encouraging, and offers suggestions for improvement that are within a student's grasp."

Over a period of time, several meta-analyses have substantiated that feedback is essential to student learning (Hattie & Timperly, 2007; Carless, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Feedback is also an important component of providing an exemplary online education experience (Perry & Edwards, 2005, 2006). The 2013 National Online Learners Priorities Report presents responses over a three year period of 114,138 student's from 110 institutions to The Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners. Nearly 73,000 of the responses were from primarily online undergraduate students who identified timely feedback from faculty about their progress as one of the top challenges to online education (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

As reported by Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002), students perceive that feedback will tell them whether what they are doing is right or wrong and will help them improve performance.

Rhodes and Nevill (2004) found first-year undergraduates to be deeply dissatisfied with the “quality of feedback” on their work which is the same complaint shared by online students. In addition, Sull surveyed more than 300 online students and cited poor feedback from 68% of their instructors as one of their most vexing issues (Sull, 2008). Online instructors who rely on asynchronous email accounts or message board as the primary feedback method may contribute to this dissatisfaction (Cochran, 2013).

Because students often consider ‘feedback’ as verbal/written comments and a grade given by an instructor for their performance on an assigned task, Ladyshevsky (2013) reports that teacher immediacy in providing feedback is an important factor in student satisfaction. Arbaugh & Hornik (2006) similarly noted prompt feedback as a significant predictor of student-perceived learning and satisfaction. In general, students do not like generalized feedback information that is impersonal and does not relate to future assignments (Higgins *et al.*, 2002; Crook *et al.*, 2006). Ladyshevsky’s survey of 101 online leadership and management students found personal contact between students and the instructor (i.e., personal sharing from the instructor, acknowledgment by name, and expressions of gratitude) to be a key factor influencing an online student’s perceived satisfaction with their learning (Ladyshevsky, 2013).

Empirical evidence has confirmed that learners who can be described as assertive, determined, self-starters and creative tend toward self-regulation and therefore make for more efficient students (Pintrich, 1995; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) define good feedback as “anything that might strengthen the students’ capacity to self-regulate their own performance” and provide a synthesis of research work producing seven principles that will aid student self-regulation. “Good feedback practice (by teachers to learners on their work) 1) helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards); 2) facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning; 3) delivers high quality information to students about their learning; 4) encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning; 5) encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem; 6) provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performances; and 7) provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Getzlaf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, & Edwards (2009) surveyed online graduate students’ perceptions of effective instructor feedback. They identified five themes related to effective instructor feedback: student involvement and individualization (feedback being a mutual process involving both student and instructor); positively constructive (providing constructive guidance that builds confidence); gentle guidance (offering explicit expectations and ongoing coaching); timeliness (mutually established and met timelines); and future orientation (applicable to future situations) (Getzlaf, et al., 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study took place in a mid-size southern Hispanic serving university that offers at least 600 online courses each semester and was conducted over a period of spring, summer and fall semesters of 2013. The authors reviewed a wide variety of published survey instruments and questionnaires used to ascertain information about student perception of instructor feedback at different universities and colleges. From these documents, the authors adapted a questionnaire developed by Jones, Bavage, Gilbertson, Gorman, Lodge, Phillips & Yeoman (2009) which had been distributed to four universities and 31 schools in the United Kingdom. The questions that

were adapted formed the basis for obtaining information about student perceptions to the feedback, types of feedback, usefulness of feedback and student satisfaction with feedback.

The questionnaire was administered each semester in only two instructors' online courses that required extensive writing on student assignments and necessitated detailed instructor feedback for these assignments. The survey link for the questionnaire was posted under the course announcement sections and asked for volunteers to answer the survey. The questionnaire was administered anonymously through Survey Monkey. There were neither incentives nor bonuses provided for answering the questionnaire. Basic demographic information was collected along with comments of student experiences with online instructor feedback.

## **PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Participants were enrolled in courses that were offered 100% online and required no synchronous dialog between the instructor and the student. Seventy volunteers completed the questionnaire out of a total of 183 possible students enrolled in legal and applied business courses. The small number of participants involved in this study is also listed as one of the limitations of this study. Participants in this study received neither incentive nor bonus for volunteering or not volunteering in the study.

Of the 70 total participants, 66% were female and 34% were male. Seventy-three percent of the participants were of Hispanic origin; 24% Caucasian; and 3% Black, African-American or Negro. The majority of the participants (70%) were in the age bracket between 30 to 49 years of age; 14% were above 50 years of age; with 16% under 29 years of age. These participants are representative of the general student population at this southern Hispanic serving university. Sixty-seven percent of the participants were seniors; 20% juniors; 10% sophomores; and 3% had graduate academic standing. This study was limited to only those volunteer students registered in spring, summer and fall 2013 semesters of only two online applied business and legal courses and as indicated in Appendix A: Demographics.

## **FINDINGS**

The following paragraphs summarize data gathered from participants and provide an overview of perceptions to the feedback provided by the instructors and how they used that feedback in future assignments. Overall, 84% of all participants indicated they were happy or extremely happy in their overall satisfaction of the instructor feedback provided to them on assignments in these online classes.

### **Perception, Use and Types of Feedback.**

To understand the types of feedback students perceived as useful in assignments, participants were asked to rank, in order of priority: a completed grading rubric, a grade, marked spelling and grammar in the feedback, brief corrections and comments in the text of the assignment and a summary of comments at the end of the assignment. Eighty-six percent of the participants indicated that a grade was most useful to them as feedback on their submitted assignments. Both a grading rubric and a summary of comments at the end of an assignment ranked second highest with corrected spelling and grammar ranking the least high at 63%. In addition to these rankings, individual questions regarding each of the feedback choices were also

asked later in the questionnaire. In response to whether participants liked having a completed grading rubric provided with each assignment as part of their feedback, 86.1% indicated they agreed or totally agreed with the question and 92.3% agreed or totally agreed they understood the assessment criteria provided for the assignments. When ranking the types of feedback, the spelling and grammar feedback rated the lowest. When asked individually, without comparing grammar and spelling markings to other feedback methods, 87.7% indicated they agreed or totally agreed with the practice of feedback that corrects the spelling and grammar on assignments.

### **Usefulness of Feedback.**

There were several questions dealing with the amount of feedback received on assignments. 92% indicated they were satisfied with the amount of feedback received, 81% indicated they were not expecting more feedback than was received, and 83% were often or always satisfied with the amount of feedback they received. Interestingly enough, only 56% indicated they did not care if they were provided with positive comments on the feedback but did want to know how they could have improved the assignment.

When asked whether or not students read the comments provided by their instructors, 93% often or always agreed they reviewed the feedback with 86% partially or totally agreeing feedback was provided quickly enough to be useful on other assignments. 98.5% partially or totally agreed that they used the feedback provided for preparing the next assignment and 98.4% paid close attention to the feedback provided. The question asking if taking notice of the instructor's feedback improved student learning garnered 93.8% partial or total agreement whereas 96% felt that the feedback that had been provided was helpful in reaching their desired level of performance in the class. Students (95%) appreciated critical comments telling them where they had gone wrong in the assignments and 89% indicated that feedback was clearly related to the assessment criteria.

### **Overall Satisfaction of Feedback.**

When the participants were asked if they had ever questioned any grades received on assignments, 58.5% indicated they had not. In the area of obtaining additional assistance to help participants understand the feedback they had received, 72.3% agreed or totally agreed they had tried to get help from the instructor. The methods for obtaining additional feedback were, in order of priority are listed in Appendix B: Feedback Methods for Obtaining Feedback.

Seventy-three percent indicated that faculty provided them with additionally sought feedback. Sixty-four percent of the students responded that they had never asked for additional feedback on any assignments. When polling students about the feedback they received, 95% indicated that feedback was frequently encouraging for the student, with 52% indicating that they had never or rarely ever received instructor comments more positive than they deserved. Actually, when asked how often respondents felt that comments on their work were more negative than deserved, 78.5% indicated rarely or never felt that way. Overall, 95.4% of respondents felt that their work had improved during the semester as a direct result of the instructor feedback they had received on their coursework.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

There were some limitations to this study, mainly the size of the study, as a convenience sample does not lend itself to generalizations to all online courses. It is suggested that in the future all online courses within a department or university would be more indicative of generalizations to online course work. Also, although it may not qualify as a true “limitation,” it should be noted that in this study, 86.1% of the participants indicated they agreed or totally agreed with the question about a completed grading rubric being provided for each assignment as part of their feedback. However, it has been reported that although the use of a rubric or “standard cover sheet” represents a structured and visible feedback system, and cover sheet commentary ensures that feedback will always occur, it may violate students’ expectations of how instructors should respond to their work (Crook, *et al.* 2006).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A student’s reaction to feedback, and the impact it has on their learning is dependent on personal learning goals and motivation (Ladyshevsky, 2013). Not all online courses require the same amount of instructor feedback on assignments and the design of a course should play a part in the feedback that must be provided to students. Student reaction to such feedback is due to affective reactions to the assignments, content and tasks of the course (Bandura, 2003).

Effective instructor feedback is a mutual process involving both students and instructors and it should provide constructive guidance that builds student confidence. It also offers explicit expectations and ongoing coaching, while adhering to mutually established timelines. Lastly, effective instructor feedback is applicable to future situations (Getzlaf, et al., 2009). Faculty members that incorporate these themes to provide constructive, detailed and meaningful feedback often bring about positive learning opportunities for students in other assignments so when feedback is included in the course design, student learning opportunities increase. One way to clarify student expectations is to include additional information in the course syllabus about when and how feedback will be provided. Instructors may also wish to incorporate the following suggestions from Sull (2008) to enhance student feedback effectiveness: “**Check email at least three times daily.** Students may be in different time zones; their professions may dictate varied posting times; they may have sudden problems—whatever the reason, checking your course email regularly will keep you on top things. **Set reminders of when and what to check.** This becomes especially important if you are teaching more than one course, and/or for more than one school. **Keep generic postings to a minimum.** The generic posting is easy but offers nothing specific to the course and does not connect you to the students. The majority of your class postings should be specific to both the course and the students. **Answer every email sent to you.** You do not need to answer each student email as soon as you see it, but make it a general rule to answer all student emails within 24 hours—and let your students know this. **Make your presence regularly known in discussions, chats, etc.** Yes, these are for your students, but they need to know that you are monitoring them and that you are active in all aspects of the course. **Offer detailed and constructive comments in assignments.** Never simply offer feedback such as, “This is wrong!”—it does the student no good. Your comments on assignments should be detailed and constructive. When a student does something good, let him or her know! **Occasionally, use humor.** Let the students know that you have a personality—put a bit of smile into your comments and postings sometimes, even using news or items to highlight certain parts of the course. This not only makes the course more enjoyable but allows you to reinforce certain

parts of the course in a lighter manner. **Note student-specific information for a more personalized approach.** Jot down information you learn about your students, either through their bios or information revealed in emails. This allows you to respond more specifically to their needs—and shows your genuine interest in the student, which is a major component in keeping students actively involved in a course. **Follow through on promises.** It is easy to make promises, but following through promises prove harder. Not following through immediately ruins your credibility, and credibility is important for any teacher, especially for the online instructor.”

One item of interest to the authors was the questioning by a couple of students of the location of the feedback provided. It seems that they were unaware of and did not take advantage of feedback attached to their gradebook in the BlackBoard Learning System. So although feedback had been provided to them the entire semester, the instructors’ response “What do you mean you never got any feedback” provides a unique teaching opportunity for both faculty and students about where to find such feedback. As a matter of fact, the authors are going to provide a specific learning module on where feedback information can be found and provide a screen by screen process to view such feedback on the first day of class.

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Appendix A: Demographics

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Participants	66% female	34% male
Origin	73% Hispanic	24% Caucasian
Age	70% 30-49 years of age	16% under 29 years of age
Ranking	76% seniors	20% juniors

Appendix B: Feedback Methods for Obtaining Feedback

Appendix B: Feedback Methods for Obtaining Feedback	
Method of Approach	Percentage
Email faculty member to ask for additional feedback	77%
Email faculty member to asked for an appointment	12%
Post a question/comment on discussion board	6%
Go by faculty members office	3%
Rely on chance meeting	2%