



Evaluating Student Work: A Different Kind of Feedback

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In the mid-1990s I worked in a small education studies department that used a wonderfully simple, three-part conceptual framework for responding to student work — whether oral presentations, written papers, or even student teaching. First, we modeled active listening by succinctly summarizing what we understood to be the students' theses or main points in their presentation, paper, or lesson. Next, we detailed their clearest strengths. Lastly, we recommended some next steps.

I continue to find this framework helpful. Students appreciate the "summary, strengths, next steps" rhythm of my responses. They like knowing that I have carefully attended to what they have said, written, or done. They like learning about what they have done well. They also seem to appreciate the sensitive and caring way I challenge them to improve. I've benefited from using this framework too. In taking the time to always find at least three strengths in each student's work, I have moved from the more common and ingrained deficit model of thinking to a much more constructive one.

In particular, the next step feedback has proved its worth. In contrast to "weaknesses" or "shortcomings," "next steps" requires

me to think and communicate in a more constructive and forward-looking manner. For example, previously I would write something like, "The lack of a self-evident organizational framework made it difficult to follow your main points." Now I frame the feedback like this, "Your next presentation will be even easier to follow and more effective if you provide an overview, use signposts to signal transitions, and summarize your main points." The differences are subtle but significant. My current approach suggests the student is developing into a more competent presenter. It conjures up positive images of continuous improvement.

Interestingly, the A students are often the most appreciative of the next steps feedback. Too often, they lament, all they receive back from professors is an "A" letter grade. Of course, on one level, they like receiving "A's," but on another level, they want and are open to feedback detailing ways they can become even better.

I also use the framework when teaching students to assess their own work and that of their peers. Before an in-class poster session, for example, I provide students with forms that include these grading criteria, two subheadings — "Clearest Strengths" and "Most Important Next Steps" — and three bullet points under each subheading. Students do not assign any sort of grades. While evaluating the

students' work and writing my own assessments, I quickly read the students' narrative assessments of one another's and their own posters. Often, the students identify strengths in their classmates' work that I have missed. Because providing assessment feedback is a new experience for students, the quality of the feedback they provide varies.

Although this framework has proved extremely helpful to me, it doesn't make assessment trouble-free. For example, despite using this approach, some students and I still have differing perceptions of what constitutes "A" work versus "B" work, etc. Other times, in the course of a semester, I see improvement in students' work directly tied to the next steps I have communicated to them, but not as often as I would like. This raises several questions relevant to my practice and that of any faculty member interested in delivering feedback to students that makes a difference. How much do we know about what students do with work that is returned to them? After checking out the grade, how thoroughly do they process the rest of the feedback? And how does their reaction to our feedback inform the ways we assess the next work they submit? I hope to explore these questions subsequently and share my insights. ●