How to Provide Constructive Feedback—That Won't Exasperate Your Students

It's mid-semester. The honeymoon is over. You and your students are exhausted. It's time to grade essays and exams—an exceedingly stressful process for you and your students.

Curing the Mid-Semester Blues

1. Take the pulse of the class
Look back to move forward. A mid-semester evaluation is a good way to determine what's working and what could be improved. You might ask:

- What aspects of this course and your instructor's teaching help you learn best?

- What specific advice would you give to help your instructor improve your learning in this course?

2. Try something new.
At mid-semester, it's easy for a class to stall. Reenergize students by doing something fresh. Don't let students drift. Follow Monty Python's advice: Now for something completely different.

3. Ask students to look backward.
Ask them to reflect on what they have learned substantively, conceptually, and methodologically.

4. Organize your course around inquiry.
Build each session around a question, a problem, or a set of questions.

Grading

It's no secret that many students care much more about their grades than knowledge and learning. This is a fact of life that instructors need to respond to. How can we reduce the stress associated with grading—and use grading for learning?

1. Prepare students in advance.
To reduce student anxiety and apprehension, explain your grading criteria. Consider showing them sample answers, or have them respond to a sample question in class.

2. State clearly what you expect students to demonstrate.
This might be problem solving. Or it might be stating and substantiating a thesis. Or evaluating and applying conceptual models or methodologies. Or analyzing data.

3. Briefly describe what constitutes "A" work, "A-" work, and so on.
Make your expectations clear.

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4. Model how you would approach a question or solve a problem.
Or better yet ask the students to do this.

5. Identify likely problems in advance.
These might include: Poorly crafted thesis statements; stating facts rather than advancing an argument; using vague, imprecise terms; rambling; writing in the passive voice.

6. Following the exam, identify problems that cropped up repeatedly.
Suggest strategies that students might adopt to deal with these problems.

Providing Constructive Feedback—That Won't Exasperate Your Students

It's easy to exasperate your students. Have unrealistic standards. Grade arbitrarily. Assign busywork. Be a bully. Be harsh. Be emotionally distant. Show favoritism. Ask questions as if there is only one right answer.

One of the biggest challenges you face is to make the grading and evaluation process constructive. The feedback process is the best chance to improve student learning and enhance their skills. To be effective, feedback needs to be timely, encouraging, and carefully tailored to the student.

1. Establish a climate of trust and respect.
Remember, student egos are fragile. Feedback should be given to help, not hurt. Be encouraging. Remember, negativity creates defensiveness.

2. Don't overwhelm students.
Limit feedback to the amount of information that the student can absorb. Identify the key areas that need additional work.

3. Keep comments impersonal.
Focus on specifics.

4. Refer back to your grading criteria.

5. Couch comments in "I" terms.
I got lost here. I'm confused—did you mean to say...?

6. Structure your comments as questions or suggestions, rather than as criticisms.

7. Rephrase the paper's main points
If you take students' ideas seriously, they will work harder to express them clearly.

8. Use questions to identify errors.
You might, for example, ask students for more information, or ask whether this is what they meant to say.

Teach Students to be Their Own Best Readers

Encourage students to ask the questions that you ask when you grade an assignment.

1. Is the opening lively and interesting?

2. Is the argument clear?

3. Is the argument situated in a larger scholarly conversation?

4. Is the argument compelling? Is it supported with concrete and convincing examples?
5. Is the essay's organization logical?

6. Does the essay take adequate account of counter-arguments and alternate interpretations?

Incorporating Peer Feedback into Your Class

One way to improve student performance is to introduce them to the grading process.

1. Ask them to read the first paragraph of an essay, then stop and respond to the following questions:
- "Are you interested in continuing to read? Why or why not?"
- "What do you think the essay will discuss?"

2. Does the opening paragraph clearly identify the paper's theme and focus?

3. What unanswered questions remain in your mind when you've finished the essay?

4. How would you strengthen the essay's argument?

5. What objections might be raised against the argument?

6. What suggestions might you give the writer of the paper?

Effective and Ineffective Advice

1. How would you respond to the following advice?
    - Omit this paragraph
    - You might consider omitting this paragraph
    - I wonder what you gain by having this paragraph here

2. How would you respond to the following comments?
    - These arguments are not convincing
    - Explain why this is the case
    - I find this statement less than convincing
    - Your point might be clearer if you state, point by point, your opponent's view, as clearly and objectively as you can. Then you can deal with each of the arguments and show the weakness in the position.

3. How would you respond to these comments?
    - Have you proved your point by merely asserting this?
    - What is it that you most want me to know about your position?
    - In academic writing, the trick is to express your opinion with authority

Commenting Meaningfully on Student Writing

Meaningful comments engage students' ideas, responding to the thesis, use of evidence, analysis, and organization. They help students understand that grades are not measures of their intelligence, but of a particular assignment's quality. They also help students learn how to self-edit and self-evaluate.

1. Respond like a reader—not a grader.

2. Use the first person singular.
I think…. I read….

3. Be positive.
You need to strike the delicate balance between truth and kindness. As Somerset Maugham observed, "People ask you for criticism, but they want only praise."

4. Suggest how the student can do better next time.

Dealing with Disappointed Students

When you begin to teach, there is a tendency to personalize interactions with students. You are overjoyed when they admire you, and you are hurt or irritated when they are withdrawn or hostile.

Remember, students are not your children or friends or enemies. They are your clients. Your job is to help them to learn.

1. Mandate a "cooling off" period

2. Listen attentively and patiently to the students' concerns.
You need to establish a professional relationship with your students. You are not their friend or a big pal; nor are you a distant authority figure. You might think of your students as your clents.

3. Try not to respond defensively.
Do not regard the student's anger, frustration, and emotion as a personal attack on you.

4. Place the "burden of proof" on the student
Do not try to placate the student. Ask the student to explain how their work fulfills the requirements of your grading criteria.

5. Be future oriented:
Help the student better prepare for the next assignment or exam. Adopt a "formative" approach: Suggest how students can study more effectively and do better on the next exam.

6. Let your students know that you believe in their capacity to develop and do well in your course.

Formulating Useful Questions

Ask students to clarify and develop their ideas.

Ask questions that probe your students' assumptions.
"What evidence supports AND refutes the notion that …?"

Ask questions that probe implications and consequences.

Ask questions that help students recognize and clarify their thought processes.

Ask students to defend (or refute) a position.

Ask questions with multiple possible answers.

Grading a Laboratory Report

▪ Purpose: The hypothesis or goal of the experiment is clear with an emphasis on the scientific principle involved.

▪ Introduction: The introduction includes sufficient background of the experimental rationale and explains the appropriateness of techniques.

▪ Methods: The description of the procedure is clear and includes appropriate references so that others can reproduce the work.

▪ Data: The format of the experimental data is easy-to-follow and appropriate, e.g., tables and graphs, with correct units and explanatory headings and legends.

▪ Results and Conclusions: The results and conclusions drawn follow logically from the data collected with an appropriate and supported discussion of alternate explanations and error analysis.

▪ Mechanics: The report is generally free of spelling, typographical, syntactical and grammatical errors, and follows conventional usage styles.

Grading an Essay

Questions to ask as you read an essay:

▪ Does the paper have a point or problem or guiding question to explore?

▪ Does the paper have a thesis which is clearly expressed near the beginning? Or is it only partially expressed? Or did you have to ferret it out?

▪ Does the thesis have a basic flaw? Is it insufficiently specific? Are key terms poorly defined?

▪ Does the paper go in the direction the introduction leaders you to believe it will go?

▪ Is there an unstated idea in the paper, perhaps an assumption, that if stated explicitly would make the paper clearer?

▪ Does the paper simplify issues too much? Does the paper deal with the full complexity of a subject?

▪ Is there enough evidence to make the paper more than a series of assertions?

▪ Does the paper make effective use of evidence?

▪ Are there gaps in the argument?

▪ Are conflicting evidence or opposing arguments omitted?

▪ Would a re-ordering of the paragraphs make the paper more compelling?

▪ Are there enough signposts and transition sentences to keep you on track as a reader?

▪ Can you hear the author's voice and opinions?

▪ Does the paper present a foregone conclusion? Does the paper pass the "so what" test?

A Rubric for Grading an Essay

1. An "A" Paper
It teaches me something new. It offers an original idea or synthesis of ideas that takes course material beyond the lecture or discussion. It advances a provocative arguments that is effectively developed and supported with compelling evidence. The prose is clear and there are no mechanical or grammatical or syntactical errors.

2. A "B" Paper
It capably engages ideas covered in class. It engages the assignment, but in a limited way. The thesis is there, but it is too broad or not concisely stated. Support for the paper's argument is sparse or sometimes unconvincing. Counter-arguments or alternative explanations aren't taken into account.

3. A "C" Paper
The paper does not demonstrate much critical thought. Potentially productive ideas are hampered by imprecise language or poor organization. The thesis is superficial. The arguments have little evidentiary support.