Selecting Feedback Techniques

By Rob Kelly

There are many ways to provide feedback to students in an online course. When selecting the type and frequency of feedback, consider what the students want and how they will benefit from it without creating an unreasonable amount of work for yourself. In an interview with Online Classroom, Rosemary Cleveland, professor of education, and Kim Kenward, instructional designer at Grand Valley State University, offered the following advice on how to manage feedback in the online learning environment:

• **Be timely with feedback.** "If you don’t start off at the beginning giving them feedback that has meaning for them, the quality of their work slips. If you give them good, strong feedback at the beginning that’s very personal, constructive, and helpful, the quality of their work [will be better] for the whole semester. If they know that somebody really cares about what they’re doing and [makes] that personal connection, they will work to that expectation. If they don’t think the instructor is spending time with their work and simply says, ‘Oh, you did a great job’ but doesn’t make anything personal, they figure, ‘Oh well, the instructor skimmed the information,’” Cleveland said.

• **Start with a positive message.** Thank the student and say something positive about his or her work before discussing areas that need to be improved. A positive message provides encouragement and makes students feel “that they really are part of the learning community … and that the class can take on personal meaning for them,” Cleveland said.

In addition, Cleveland said that it’s important to include examples from students’ work so they know that you have read it.

• **Scaffold assignments.** Assigning tasks that are relatively easy in the beginning and get progressively difficult provides students with opportunities for success, which builds confidence.

• **Help students see the connection between the course and their lives.** One way to do this is to use the private journal feature found in many learning management systems. “It’s a good complement to the discussion board,” Cleveland said. “It allows students to see the connection between the course and their lives, and to help them reflect on what they’re learning.”

• **Use diminishing frequency of involvement.** During the first week or two of class, faculty should have “routine” (read: “nearly daily”) contact with the students. As the course progresses, reduce the frequency of communication to encourage students to take more of a self-directed approach.

Continued on page 2 >> Continued on page 8 >>
students to make personal connections in their own lives in terms of what they’re reading about in the course. ... The private journal is that almost one-on-one communication between the online student and the instructor.”

- **Use rubrics.** Rubrics provide criteria for students to see how their work compares with expectations and helps them focus their work. Students can help create rubrics.

- **Consider various formats.** Most instructors (and students) are comfortable with feedback provided in text formats—whether it’s through the track changes function of Word, an email message, or measuring an assignment against a detailed rubric—but there are other options. Audio feedback can provide opportunities for nuanced feedback. It also can create a sense of instructor presence and a personal connection between student and instructor.

In a survey of their students, approximately 70 percent liked having audio feedback because they could hear the instructor’s voice, which makes the message more personal, “almost like a conversation,” Cleveland said.

“Overall, we’re seeing a trend at our university for more oral feedback. Our students are craving it. They’re asking their instructors to use the Grade Center [within Blackboard] to provide more detailed feedback,” Kenward said.

Audio feedback offers benefits to instructors as well. For example, a student teacher who used audio feedback said, “Voice feedback reduces the amount of time it takes to respond to the students because most faculty, like myself, can talk faster than they can type.”

Here’s another student comment: “I think that adding a voice file to my graded comments was worthwhile. It adds a personal feel to the online course, and it’s good to receive audio feedback, which contains many elements that are lacking in written feedback.”

One way to embed video is by using software such as Audacity to create MP3 files. Some versions of Blackboard feature a tool called Voice Collaborate that enables users to embed audio, Slideshare, YouTube, or Flickr anywhere within the LMS by clicking on the mashup plugin that appears in every part of Blackboard. (Students also have the ability to use this feature.)

- **Find a system that works for you.** Providing frequent feedback can create a workload issue. This is why it’s important to find ways of doing it that make as easy as possible. Cleveland, for example, takes notes as she reads students’ assignments. “If I can have three or four phrases based on what the students said and then respond to it, it’s much easier for me—I don’t have to respond to everything they say, but if I can respond to two or three key points in the journal or discussion board, they know that it’s a meaningful response,” she said.

Kenward said that some
creating an ethical online environment

Because successful communication is essential to learning in an online course, instructors and instructional designers need to foster a respectful, welcoming environment and to prepare for potential problems that can arise, such as cyber harassment, trolling, and flaming. In an email interview with Online Classroom, Steven T. Varela, senior instructional designer/lecturer with Instructional Support Services at the University of Texas–El Paso, offered advice on managing online communication to create and maintain an ethical learning environment.

OC: How do you define cyber harassment, trolling, and flaming?

Varela: In basic terms, cyber harassment is using online tools to bully and/or stalk others sexually or with hostility. Typically cyber harassment occurs through email, discussion forums, and/or social media.

Trolls are online users who look for opportunities to create conflicts with or between other users of discussion forums or social media, while flames attempt to make an already established conflict worse by [exacerbating] a situation. Politics, religion, and sexuality all are usual target points for trolls and flames.

OC: How big a problem are these in online courses? How does this type of behavior differ from what you might find in a face-to-face classroom?

Varela: By and large, students who take online courses comport themselves respectfully with regard to classmates and instructors and with the utmost collegiality. The online environment, however, has created an interesting space where cyber harassment, trolling, and flaming can easily occur.

On one hand, having communication forums like discussion boards has empowered students who may be more expressive and participatory online, when in traditional classrooms they tend to be more introverted. Unfortunately, this same “liberation” can come in negative forms through communication that a student would never verbalize in a face-to-face classroom but that they now feel able and willing to express online.

It’s not so much that the online learning environment has contributed to these behaviors, but rather it’s a lack of media literacy on the part of the users. Students feel anonymous hiding behind a user name or avatar, even though they aren’t, and feel less accountable (as they maneuver through a space they see as temporary and transient), when the opposite it true.

OC: How might these behaviors affect an online course?

Varela: If left unchecked, these behaviors can be quite detrimental to a class, sometimes effectively shutting down the productive interaction and communication we all want in a course. The goal for any class is to create an environment, whether online or face-to-face, where students feel safe and secure in expressing their opinions, knowledge, and perspectives regarding their learning. We also, however, live in a time where it has become increasingly difficult to know when an emotional argument between students may lead to something far more dangerous. Faculty therefore need to have a strong online presence—offering support and redirection if necessary, and sometimes taking the time to teach and/or remind students of the level of discourse and civility expected in a class.

OC: What can be done up front to minimize these behaviors? What sort of preparation can students go through to make these incidents less likely?

Varela: It all begins with the syllabus and the parameters set for students and their behavior/participation in a course. Faculty need to be specific about what is appropriate for interactions between faculty and students and between students themselves. It is important to be clear, especially for the online environment, about “netiquette” as well as about the possible sanctions that may result if policy is broken.

In order to prepare students, faculty might present hypothetical examples of different problematic interactions to students the first week of class, on the discussion board. Have them identify problematic behavior using the syllabus as a reference, consider sanctions, propose ways to prevent these types of exchanges, and discuss their expectations for the interactions they will have in the course.

OC: What role if any does instructional design play in minimizing these behaviors? When incidents of harassment, trolling, or flaming occur, what

Continued on page 4 >>
can be done to minimize their impact?

Varela: Instructional design and course management are integral in minimizing these behaviors. There are some basic protocols I always recommend to faculty:

• **Get to know your dean of students/judicial affairs administrator.** That person is an invaluable resource when faculty face situations with student behavior that they are unsure how to handle. Whether for simple advice or more direct action, this administrator is a good starting point, including for the documentation process.

• **Provide clear expectations/netiquette on the syllabus.** These should be reiterated throughout the course and not as a one-time “read the syllabus” directive. The syllabus should not be a document used in isolation but rather should be a map for student success that is integrated throughout the course—for what they will learn but also for expectations of their collegiality.

• **Educate first!** When a concern is raised, refer students back to the syllabus, or perhaps the university’s student handbook, and use it as a teaching moment to explain why the student’s behavior/communication was an issue.

• **Save documentation—NEVER** delete anything. Use your learning management system to hide problematic discussion threads, and save all communication with the student. You want to be able to show a process of intervention and attempts at finding a solution if institutional intervention might be needed.

• **Don’t ignore the situation.** It would only serve to demonstrate that there was nothing wrong with the behavior/interaction and/or that your syllabus policies are not to be taken seriously.

**OC: What authority does an instructor typically have in these situations? Can an instructor kick a student out of an online course for these behaviors? What are some possible sanctions for these types of behavior?**

Varela: When clear policies, standards, and expectations are identified in the syllabus, sanctions can range from warnings to a loss of participation points to preventing the student from participating in communication forums like a discussion board if necessary (thereby losing the points associated with it). In extreme cases, it is possible to remove a student from the online course; however, strong documentation is needed, as well as evidence that opportunities were afforded to the student to correct his or her behavior.

In addition, every university has some form of a student handbook of policies and procedures governing student behavior at that university. Typically, there is a “disruptive acts” policy, stating something to the effect that the obstruction or disruption of any teaching, research, administrative, disciplinary, public service, or other authorized activity on campus (or under the authority of the university or on property owned or controlled by the university) is prohibited and will subject the student or group of students to disciplinary action, which again, depending on the severity of the infraction, can include removal from the course or even expulsion from the university.

**OC: When is institutional intervention needed?**

Varela: The best advice I ever received on this was from the dean of students at my university. He said, “If you feel you should have come to see me, you probably already should have.” It’s a judgment call by faculty, but we shouldn’t hesitate to seek outside help to gain additional insight and perspective about issues like this. Some issues are greater than what can be handled through classroom management strategies, and offices like judicial affairs (or whatever it may be called at your institution) are there to work on behalf of faculty, students, and the institution itself—and to seek the best reconciliation for all three.

Steven T. Varela is currently a senior instructional designer/lecturer with Instructional Support Services at UTEP who specializes in course development and implementation, teaching with technology, and blended and online learning. His research and teaching interests include the areas of gamification and game-based learning, social media, and gesture-based/immersive teaching and learning. Steve has been a lecturer for the Department of English and University Studies and was a recipient of the UT Regents Award for Outstanding Teaching.
Build Community, Extend Learning with Online Synchronous Sessions

By Rob Kelly

Consideration of convenience and flexibility typically leads instructors and instructional designers to favor asynchronous over synchronous learning. But given the potential benefits of synchronous communication, perhaps it’s time to rethink the 100 percent asynchronous course.

At St. Leo University, education professors Carol Todd and Keya Mukherjee have been using Eluminate, a platform that enables synchronous audio, video, and text chat as well as various collaboration tools to enhance their asynchronous online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses. In a study of their use of this synchronous tool that included quantitative and qualitative data, they found that synchronous interaction can improve community.

These two professors use Eluminate for specific pedagogical reasons, not just for building community; however, desire for community building and reducing isolation prompted them to use this tool. “When I first came to [online teaching] from teaching face-to-face courses, one of the areas I struggled with was the silo effect. Students missed the community of the face-to-face courses. That’s why I started looking at using the [online learning space] to build a learning community, so students are not just silos working from behind their computers and turning in individual pieces of work. I wanted to get the students to work together to build a community that would tie not just into the pedagogical sense of community but also into our Benedictine core values where we talk about student-to-student interaction and between the students and the instructor,” Mukherjee says.

Mukherjee holds synchronous sessions once a week in her online courses. Each 30-to-45-minute session has an instructional agenda. She spends approximately 10 minutes answering questions related to assignments, and the rest of the time is spent on “extending the instruction of the online module,” which might include additional readings, jigsaws, viewing video, or discussion.

Similarly, Todd uses Eluminate sessions to:

• enhance the instruction in the online modules;
• explain assignments and rubrics; and
• build community.

Synchronous sessions are optional in both instructors’ courses, and while attendance varies, they typically get 80 percent attendance rates, presumably because students find these synchronous sessions valuable. (Recordings of each session are available for those who don’t attend.) Students can participate via text chat, audio, or video—depending on their access to the various technologies.

Evidence of community

Based on observation and feedback from students, evidence of the effects of synchronous sessions on community emerges. For example, in a recent synchronous session at the end of one of Todd’s courses, students had a few questions regarding the last assignment, but most of the conversation focused on the community aspects of the synchronous sessions. Students reflected on the use of Eluminate, postgraduation plans, and personal issues. “You could see in the chat and listen to their conversation and understand that they had built these relationships with each other that they would not have had the opportunity to build strictly [asynchronously] online. By using the online conferencing they were able to see each other and talk with each other. At the end of their program they were not singular people in my class. They had built a community. One student had one more class to take, and classmates offered their advice and support. You could see where they came together as a cadre and a community of students,” Todd says.

In addition to observations, Todd and Mukherjee asked students Likert scale and open-ended questions about their experience with these synchronous sessions. “Over and over again in different ways, [students] talked about how there was no more social isolation.”

Todd also gathered data on classes before and after using Eluminate. She teaches the first and last classes in the program and looked at the data and end-of-course evaluations in the first class pre- and post-Eluminate and the last class pre- and post-Eluminate. She found in these two courses, Continued on page 8 >>
I have been teaching online for 19 years, and during this time I have encountered many online courses where the layout was less than smooth, the writing quality embarrassing, and the contents confusing. And you who read this column have also experienced this: I know because many of you have emailed me about the problem. This should not and does not have to be. Below are some simple guidelines to ensure that each course is a high-quality learning experience.

**The course must be easy to navigate.** The best course delivery systems are not overly complex. Make it elementary for students to find their way around the course’s components, and allow easy access for instructors when changes to the course need to be made. Twenty-first century technology can allow instructional designers to do wonderful things with the course, but the user of the course must always be kept in mind.

Suggestion: Before the course goes live, get input from instructors, and invite feedback from instructors on the first edition of the course (including student feedback) for any tweaks that need to be made.

**All assignments should include requirements and be easy to understand.** It happens more often than one might think: key components of an assignment, such as length, due date, and weight of the assignment, are left out. It is imperative that all items are included so the students are not confused. Including a checklist of assignment requirements can be helpful. And be sure the wording of the assignment—the topic, the approach students are expected to take, examples of key assignment components—is easy to understand and structured in a manner for effortless reading.

**Check all spelling, punctuation, and grammar.** Students look to course websites/systems as extensions of the school and the instructor; thus, when the writing is poor it reflects on all associated with the course. While a Web or course developer will be expert in that part of the course structure, he or she may not be fully knowledgeable in the ways of writing; thus it is imperative that other parties be brought in to check and double-check all writing in the course for typos, incorrect spelling and punctuation, and poor grammar. Such mistakes should be nonexistent.

**Be sure labeling of assignments is in sync with the gradebook.** Online courses will typically have a syllabus that gives a breakdown of points for assignments; the assignments with points attached; and a gradebook, also with points for each assignment. These must match if the instructor cannot change any that are out of whack, and if it is possible for the instructor to make changes, the instructions on how to do this should be made clear and easily accessible to the instructor. Also, be sure that any multiple descriptions of assignments in the course are parallel in content.

**Assignment due dates must be in sync and up to date.** It can be easy to overlook assignment due dates when the same course is being used from a previous session or semester, yet this can bring about major confusion for the students and the instructor if the dates are old or if the breakdown of due dates, class weeks, or class modules is not in sync when appearing multiple times. Suggestion: post an easy-to-read chart of weekly assignments, due dates, weight of assignments, and course readings so students and instructors can have a master overview of each week.

**Do not be an academic, scholarly writer in a course.** Often a department chair, faculty manager, supervisor, or course content developer will write the lectures and/or assignment descriptions and/or discussion threads—and they will do so in complex, highly stylistic, and pedantic language that makes it difficult for students to quickly digest what is needed (if an assignment or discussion thread) or the material to be read (if a lecture). It is here where the author must keep two folders of writing: one for scholarly publications and papers, another with more basic, conversational writing for students. Yes, students need to push themselves to a higher level of education, but the writing should not be a barrier to students understanding of the course materials.

**Use illustrations, graphs, and Web links.** Most courses contain a large amount of text, and even when this text is broken up with subheads, bolding, italics, and white space, it can still become boring and same old, same old to the students. By inserting hyperlinks in text and adding graphs and other visuals to illustrate...
Students come into courses with varying degrees of computer expertise, and this should be anticipated by providing PowerPoint presentations, videos, information sheets, and/or audios that explain the technical basics required for a course. And along with these there should always be an IT contact number (with 24/7 support) for more assistance. Students should never need to worry about not having a full learning experience in a course due to their lack of computer knowledge.

Your efforts represent the school. The courses that students take are front and center for all to see—not just the students, but also anyone the students allow to view the course. Thus, when a course looks good in all of its nooks and crannies, this reflects positively on the school—yet a shoddily structured or poorly written course immediately takes away a bit of luster and panache from the school. Beyond taking the time to be sure all is in place, make certain good writing is de rigueur; always require the instructor to go through the course before it starts to check for any hiccups, guffaws, and whoopsie-doodles; the more that can be corrected before a course begins, the more students can focus solely on learning the course material rather than being interrupted by poor course layout or writing.

REMEMBER: Puzzles, riddles, mazes, optical illusions, jigsaws, and brain teasers can be entertaining and educational—but they should never become definitions for an online course.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for 19 years and has a national reputation in the subject, writing and conducting workshops on distance learning, with national recognition in the field of distance education. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his second online teaching text. Please write him at errolcraigsull@aol.com with your suggestions and comments—he always responds!

Instructors use dual monitors—one to view each student’s assignment and one to access a spreadsheet to enter feedback.

- Provide opportunities for peer feedback. On a major assignment in one of her courses, Cleveland requires students to provide feedback to each other before submitting the assignment for a grade. Students submit their work to the discussion board, and a partner offers feedback using a detailed rubric Cleveland provides. Each student can then make improvements before submitting it for a grade. In addition, this provides a way for students to engage with each other. “We thought that was a positive addition to the [course],” Cleveland said.

For more information

To see a screencast on this topic, see www.screencast.com/t/jBnBfsAyBFIC.
especially in the first class, that post-Eluminate scores were higher than pre-Eluminate scores in terms of student interest and learning.

In end-of-course evaluations, ratings of communication in particular improved. “Communication had always been my weakest area in my end-of-course evaluations prior to using Eluminate. I can no longer say that,” Todd says.

An added benefit

When online instructors teach courses that they had no part in developing, their role can be rather limited, providing guidance and feedback in discussions and on assignments. However, online instructors have a wealth of experience and expertise in the subjects they teach that often does not come across to students.

Synchronous sessions can give adjuncts a voice and provide an opportunity for them to share their specialized knowledge, experience, and opinions in a way that might not necessarily come across as effectively via email or discussion boards, Mukherjee says.

Advice

Be flexible. You won’t find a time that works for everyone. Pick a time and offer recordings to those who cannot attend. Given the nature of online learning, it would be difficult to require attendance, but if you make the experience valuable, students will make an effort to be present at the live session.

Have an agenda. “To become interactive, you need each session, however small, to have an agenda that links to the overall course, to the particular module. And you need to tell the students, ‘I’m going to enhance the instructional module.’ There needs to be a draw. There needs to be a reason. My suggestion would be that all instructors need to design something that is beyond what was in the module as a way for students to see there is value in this session. Using it for office hours is not in my experience a very successful venture,” Mukherjee says.

The agenda should be based partly on students’ needs. Todd says. “When I invite my students to come, I have an agenda, but I also meet them where they are in the course. You have to have an agenda, whether it’s answering questions, instructing, or clarifying. I do all of these, and I have an agenda I share with my students.”

Make it compelling. One of the distinguishing features of online learning is convenience, which was and continues to be a major attraction for students. However, Mukherjee believes that students will rearrange their schedules to accommodate worthwhile synchronous sessions. “People are willing to do it if they see it as meaningful. The synchronous sessions have to carry meaning and weight, and students must see the connection between the learning going on in the module and the synchronous session,” she says.

Vary the format. Mukherjee has hosted Eluminate sessions up to four hours long. To keep students engaged in these sessions, she varies the pace and divides it up into segments that are no longer than 15 minutes.

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students to let them know you’re there. Look for excuses to interact—send reminder emails, post tips for upcoming assignments, offer advice, post encouragement, and introduce students to institutional resources, etc. This amount of contact demonstrates that you are involved and concerned during a time in which students are forming their impressions of you. As the class gets into a routine and students feel comfortable with you and the course expectations, you can decrease your involvement of this type to the “necessities.” You will have established yourself as a caring and involved professor.

• Answer student questions before they ask. If you have taught a class a number of times, you know the typical questions students have about expectations and assignments. Try to stay a step ahead of your students and answer their questions before they ask. Doing so portrays a professor who is thinking about and anticipating student problems, including their confusion. Again, you are creating the students’ impression of you as an active, caring, and involved professor.