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A Four-Step Approach for Giving Constructive Student Feedback in Online Courses

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Giving constructive feedback to students is one of the most powerful pedagogical functions a teacher can provide for learners. Yet, teachers often are reluctant to provide feedback for various reasons, like the fear of coming across as critical or the risk of hurting someone's feelings. But the fact is that good learners crave teacher feedback—even in the form of challenge for deeper thinking.

Constructive instructor feedback in an online course helps promote and maintain student engagement. The following four-step approach to effective feedback can make for an efficient “formula” for providing feedback without getting overwhelmed. Additionally, instructors can offer this four-step approach as the standard practice for students' own feedback responses in discussion forums. Here is a four-step process for giving constructive feedback in an online class (this works just as well in a classroom context).

A Four-Step Approach to Constructive Feedback

Step 1: Clarify

The first step in this feedback procedure is the **question of clarification**. These are questions that can be answered with very brief responses. They do not raise substantive or philosophical issues, and they are not judgmental. They are merely a way to establish that you heard and understood what was said and/or meant and get clear on important details that affect

understanding.

Asking students to clarify their responses helps them take responsibility for their thinking and for their answers. It also helps them correct vagueness and to clarify their own initial thinking and “go deeper.” Examples: “Did you mean to say...?” “How are you using the term _____. Can you provide a definition?” “When you said x, did you mean y?” “Was it a sophomore class?” “Were you the only teacher?” “Was this at the start of the year?” “How long was this unit?” “Can you give an example?”

Step 2: Value

Next, **state what you value** in the student’s effort or response. Too often, we skip this step and go right onto points of contention, assuming people know we appreciate their engagement and effort in responding. But it’s amazing how much everyone needs affirmation that their efforts are heard and appreciated. Tell the student what makes sense, what seems inspired, what aligns with your own perceptions and experience, what informs your own thinking. Or simply acknowledge a good effort. This sets up a great foundation from which to deal with the (often minor, but sometimes large) points of disagreement or challenges to deeper or more responsible thinking.

Step 3: Challenge

At the third step, get into those **ideas that you want your students to wonder about or wrestle with**. This is a good time to use techniques like using “I-messages” (“When you talk about doing x, I think about...” or “When I’ve done x in the past, students have...”) or raising questions by wondering rather than pronouncing judgments (“I wonder if x would happen when I did y,” or “When you suggested x, I wondered if it might...” or “What do you think would happen if...”).

This is the phase for honest, constructive concerns, and, at the same time, for delicacy. If we establish a culture of respectful questioning and a challenge for learning that makes it clear that reasonable people can disagree and differences in contexts really do make different solutions effective, such a climate can keep conversation going. Staying in conversation means we help students learn how to be able to understand each other better over time.

Step 4: Suggestions for Deeper Thinking/Exploration

Finally, after exploring the questions that arise in response to someone’s work, we can **offer suggestions** for deeper engagement. For example: “From our perspective, and the limited view we have of the complexity of the situation, I wonder if [suggestion] would make a difference?” “Once I tried [some suggested solution] in a similar situation, and z happened.” “I’ve heard of someone doing [a suggestion] in the face of such challenges, and I was so inspired by that idea!” “What if you [a suggestion]?” “I wonder if you’ve tried [a suggestion]?” Adding “...what do you think?” to these types of questions invites a response for deeper engagement.

The key here is staying genuinely open to the possibility that you don't know what's best for this situation, but that you hope you'll be able to offer something helpful, some bit of insight that might make sense in the complexity of the question or dilemma the person is managing or attempting to address.

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