Instructor Perceptions of Feedback and the Best Practices: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT: Research on instructional feedback, based on *feedback intervention theory*, has indicated that feedback is effective when it does not include evaluative information, such as scores and grades. That is, instructors provide more effective feedback for students when the feedback focuses on how students can improve their skills, rather than how they performed on an individual assignment. In addition, research demonstrates that trait differences in learners affect how students process instructional feedback and that feedback should be adapted to the nature of the learning task. After reviewing research , we ask an important practical question: Are recent understandings of the feedback process being utilized in the everyday practice of college instructors? Using the interview method, we conducted a pilot study and gathered data about how instructors use instructional feedback. Data indicates that instructors' typical use of classroom feedback differs from best practices. Instructors can provide more effective instructional feedback—comments that help students improve their skills—by applying these practices to feedback that they provide on their students' work.

Keywords: feedback; instructional communication; grading; instructor comments

An important part of instruction, feedback on schoolwork provides students with information on what they are doing well in their work and on how they can improve. Feedback provides a valuable map for students to determine how they can move forward. However, feedback is not standardized: that is, faculty provide feedback much in the same way that their own instructors responded, and few heuristics exist to help instructors provide valuable, effective, and student-focused comments. Research on feedback is sparse, even in the area of instructional communication (Quigly & Nyquist, 1992).

Twenty-five years ago, researchers claimed, "In contrast to its fundamental and central position in other social sciences, feedback still occupies a limited and restricted place in theories of communication" (Frandsen & Mills, 1993, pp. 79-80). In response, researchers addressed this concern and introduced theoretical perspectives, attribution theory (Booth-Butterfield, 1989), information processing perspectives (King & Young, 2002), and feedback intervention theory (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Additionally, researchers introduced communication practices that allow instructors and students to better manage and adapt feedback in adjusting to potential threats to face has emphasized the importance of feedback (e.g., Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008).

Other researchers and publications also responded. For example, *Communication Education* (volume 60, issue 1) was largely devoted to the exploration of feedback in instruction.

While this increased scholarly attention to feedback is notable, it has raised potential problems. For example, King, Schrodt, & Weisel (2009) developed a feedback orientation instrument that delineated the perceptual dimensions along which students respond to feedback from instructors. One explicit goal of this research is to permit teachers to tailor feedback to the needs of students. Though this goal is worthy, significant concerns could be raised regarding the inappropriate differential treatment of students (such as the teacher

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expectancy effect; see McKown & Weinstein, 2008). A related area of concern is teacher perceptions of the appropriateness of overtly evaluative feedback, such as grades, as a principle effort toward student improvement. The major axiom of *feedback intervention theory* (FIT) is that feedback that directs attention to meta-task issues (such as grading) reduces the effectiveness of the feedback intervention (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). To the extent that grading and performance improvement feedback are equivalent, classroom practices are at odds with our research findings. Accordingly, instructors need to understand the extent to which they perceive a need to provide performance improvement feedback independent from grading.

The present paper addresses the issue of teacher perceptions of student directed feedback; specifically, the perceptions of circumstances under which feedback should be individualized versus the limits and dangers of differential treatment, as well as teacher perceptions of the usefulness of combining corrective feedback with evaluative information. In short, to what extent should teacher perceptions of students find their way into performance feedback?

An Appropriate Definition of Corrective Feedback.

To address this issue of teacher perceptions of feedback, this essay will begin by reviewing the evolution of our understanding of feedback leading to the advent of FIT. It will then examine the mechanisms involved in successful feedback interventions and the manner in which evaluation harms those interventions due to focus on meta-task issues. Briefly, the essay will address the issues of trait differences in learners' responses to feedback and will examine important differences in the nature of the task itself that impact successful feedback. Finally, a brief pilot study will be presented involving interviews of instructors' teaching practice when providing feedback.

Feedback can be an ambiguous term that has been defined as generally as any response to a message (Cusella, 1987). In point of fact, feedback was a central concept in interactive models of communication (e.g., viewing communication as a series of interacting elements such as source, receiver, message, and feedback). This cybernetic approach was adapted from Shannon and Weaver's (1949) information processing model and imported from electronic communication in an attempt to explain human communicative processes. Of course, metaphors usually break down at some point and the complexities of human communication could not easily be explained with a mechanistic, interactive approach. By contrast, contemporary scholars view communication as a transaction in which primary messages, feedback, and roles become indistinguishable as individuals cooperatively produce messages and engage in the social construction of

meaning. In this transactional perspective, feedback becomes irrelevant and we could simply be done with it.

However, interpersonal communication is not the only context with which we are concerned. Instructional communication is often public in nature and, under most circumstances involves an attempt to correct student performance. For example teachers osbserve and publically evaluate student problem-solving skills in areas such as math and technology, answers to teacher questions, student communication performance, and critical reflection on class content. This larger role of feedback as a form of performance adjustment harkens back to the original understanding of the term found in cybernetics system theory (Frandsen and Millis, 1993). Instructors *do* respond to student performance with messages intended to correct deficient performance and this activity is very appropriately labeled *feedback*. Corrective feedback of this type should be distinguished from two other potential types of feedback: homeostasis and positive feedback. *Homeostasis* is self-generating, self-correcting feedback where a learner is able to directly observe performance in such a manner that self-correction is possible (Booth-Butterfield, 1989). An example would be shooting a basketball too hard and striking the backboard: reduce muscle tension and add arch to the shot. Another common term is *positive feedback*—assuring the learner that performance is appropriate. This is most commonly considered positive reinforcement and has a long and important history as an effective tool in behavioral modification. It is, however, *not* the flip side of corrective feedback; it differs in both function and perception from corrective feedback (Booth-Butterfield, 1989).

FIT offered a new perspective on the issue of instructional feedback, along with a new language to explain the important components of the feedback mechanism. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) proposed that *feedback interventions* were, "...actions taken by (an) external change agent(s) to provide information regarding aspects of one's task performance" (p. 255). Second, a *standard gap* is the difference between the learner's current performance and the desired performance. Instructional feedback communicates this difference, thus, the *feedback standard gap*. Finally, *locus of attention* was proposed as the key component in the successful implementation of instructional messages. When the learner's attention is directed to the task, successful performance ensues. When the learner's attention is directed to meta-task issues (e.g., negative attributions about the instructor, grades, self-consciousness, etc.), learning is unlikely.

A meta-analysis of well over 600 effect sizes revealed startling findings. Almost 1/3 of the feedback studies found no effect for attempted feedback interventions and 38% of the effects were in the opposite direction

than intended. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded, "the presence of negative effects of feedback interventions on performance are robust and not artifacts" (p. 258). After careful analysis, Kluger and DeNisi concluded that locus of attention was the primary contributor to the discrepant findings. Other contributing factors included learner trait differences and the nature of the task itself. These observations formed the nucleus of FIT.

Evidence of Effective Feedback.

Evidence supporting the claim that evaluation of performance attenuates the value of instructional feedback is widespread (for a review, see Brookhart, 2008). In communication studies, the finding was asserted by Booth-Butterfield (1989) in her examination of student attributions concerning feedback. In the area of public speaking, Smith and King (2005) used an experimental design to demonstrate that overtly evaluative feedback produced a boomerang effect, attenuating the value of corrective feedback. Most recently, King (2016) demonstrated that information concerning the grades assigned to speaking performance attenuated future performance. Interestingly, this study showed that it was not just poor grades that reduced the effectiveness of feedback. Feedback containing good grades also led to less adaptation of corrective feedback and less successful performance. So, as predicted by FIT, any evaluative information (whether bad or good) reduces the effectiveness of feedback because the learner is focused on the evaluation (meta-task issues) rather than correcting performance.

A second area that may, according to FIT, explain variation in the effectiveness of feedback interventions is trait differences among learners. To this end, a feedback orientation instrument was developed and validated (King, Schrodt, & Weisel, 2009). Four primary factors were revealed in student perceptions of feedback: the potential threat of feedback (sensitivity, or attributional sensitivity), the potential usefulness of feedback (utility), the ability to remember feedback (retention) and the nature of feedback disclosure (confidentiality). Of these four dimensions, sensitivity and utility have proven most robust and have been linked to successful feedback interventions in speaking performance (King, 2016). These two dimensions have also been linked to the use of supportive instructor facework (Trees, Kerssen-Griep, & Hess, 2009) and, when used as a covariate to eliminate differences in feedback perceptions, reveal important relationships between facework and variables such as teachers' nonverbal immediacy. (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011).

The final factor implicated in the effectiveness of feedback was the nature of the task. King, Young, & Behnke (2000) demonstrated that immediate feedback was effective for improving delivery skills in public

speaking but not for speech composition issues (delayed feedback proved more efficacious for composition). One task, delivery, utilized working memory and the inculcation of skills that are usually reflexive, enacted with little conscious attention. The other required deliberative, executive processes. Thus, feedback had to be adapted to the nature of the task at hand, automatic vs. effortful cognitive processes. Alterations in the task have impacted feedback effectiveness in other areas as well, such as health communication (Hirvonen, Enwald, Bath, Pyky, Korpelainen, & Hotari, 2015).

After reviewing FIT and the findings supporting FIT claims concerning locus of attention, trait differences, and differences related to the nature of the learning task, a question emerges regarding the extent to which these findings are being commonly used in college classrooms. This leads to a general research question: *Are college instructor practices in the use of feedback consistent with evidence of best practices?*

Method

Selection of the sample was by convenience: individuals acquainted with the researcher or individuals recommended by such acquaintances. Interviews were conducted in person and by telephone. We would identify our interviews as standardized, open-ended interviews, for which all respondents were asked the same open-ended questions or yes/no questions with open-ended questions to expand their responses (McNamara, 2008). University institutional review board procedures were followed for the collection of this data.

An initial list of 18 questions was edited and reduced to 10 questions that seemed most relevant to the issues involved in the general research question. These questions are shown in the Appendix. The interview was conceived as moderately scheduled with planned questions presented to all interviewees and follow-up questions inserted as appropriate. All interviews were recorded, with permission of interviewees, and transcribed for analysis. Interviewees were assured that their responses were confidential and could not be identified when pooled with other responses. The small number of interviewees prohibited the legitimate use of content analysis but the researcher did investigate the emergence of categories and trends in responses.

Results

To answer the research question, we involved 17 college instructors to consider how they deliver instructional feedback in an initial pilot study. The instructors included 5 (29.41%) from community colleges, 4 (23.53%) from state universities with more

than 35,000 students, and 8 (47.06%) from a private university with less than 20,000 students. All instructors had been teaching for at least 3 years on a full-time basis. Several disciplines were represented, including communication studies, English/language arts, political science, religion, and physics. Eleven (64.71%) participants were women and 6 (35.29%) were men. Because interviews were used and confidentiality was not possible, the researcher did not wish to be so intrusive as to ask for age, but the mean years of college teaching experience in the sample was approximately 11.5 years.

Importance of Feedback in the Learning Process.

All respondents (100.00%) indicated that feedback was crucial to learning. Interestingly, only 2 (11.76%) of 17 respondents mentioned feedback from students to the teacher. All other respondents (15 respondents; 88.24%) spoke at length about the value of feedback provided by the instructor to the students. An abundance of methods was employed in providing feedback, including tests scores and grades (17 respondents; 100.00%), written critiques of various kinds (14 respondents; 82.35%), oral feedback given directly (10 respondents; 58.82%), indirect feedback (3 respondents; 17.65%), and nonverbal indicators (1 respondents; 5.88%). While only 2 of the respondents (11.76%) initially mentioned student to teacher feedback, a prompting question (see Appendix for questions and sequence) indicated that instructors do receive substantial feedback from students. Interestingly, only 3 respondents (17.65%) reported having established formal methods for generating student feedback—e.g., written prompts such as "what can I do better to help you in this class." Most instructors mentioned formal assessments such as end-of-semester ratings and most mentioned direct and indirect comments from students. The majority (12 respondents; 70.59%) mentioned nonverbal features such as strange and quizzical looks, lack of attention, or turning to talk with peers. Most (10 respondents; 58.82%) mentioned office and after-class individual conferences where students could express their concerns, but these conferences were limited to a small minority of students. None of the instructors (0.00%) indicated that student performance, such as examination grades, functioned as a form of feedback to the instructor such that the instructor needed to adapt to teach the content more effectively.

Instructors regularly spoke of positive and negative feedback (13 respondents; 76.47%). Almost one-half of the respondents (8 respondents; 47.06%) indicated that teaching was best when positive feedback was given in abundance and negative feedback given as seldom as practicable. The idea of exposing a feedback standard gap did not emerge, and most instructors seemed to believe that students ought to be able to view for themselves how performance should be corrected (this was most often implied rather than stated).

The Use of Grades as Feedback.

All respondents (17 respondents; 100.00%) indicated that scores and grades were a primary vehicle for providing feedback. Four respondents (23.53%) gave answers that indicated concern about grades. For example, one respondent indicated,

Grades seem to separate me from my students. They become defensive and I honestly think it's harder to reach them and teach them after a test. If [the school] would let me, I would dispense with grades altogether, though I'm afraid that many of them wouldn't bother to show up for class.

Another respondent indicated that students have become so grade conscious that they are only concerned with that number and not with learning the content for its own sake.

Fifteen of the respondents (88.24%) indicated that they did utilize assignments for which there were no grades, but follow-up questions appeared to indicate that most of these were classroom learning activities that involved little opportunity for feedback. The trend seemed to be that anything consequential to student learning needed to have an associated grade. Instructors seemed to accept this as part of collegiate orthodoxy and generally did not think to question it. One respondent indicated, "Students expect to be evaluated and are used to it. They wouldn't know what to do without it."

In terms of testing procedures, instructors reviewed incorrect answers only in cases where students sought individual meetings. Otherwise, correct answers were discussed in class or distributed to the class. Explanations for correct answers were given in public, during class by 13 instructors (76.47%), and all made some attempt to respond to frequently missed questions or misunderstood content by careful explanation during class. The most common impression given was that the material was either learned or missed and, rather than correcting deficient performance, it was time to move on to the next block of content. In a few cases (5 respondents; 29.41%) instructors expressed some use of mastery instruction where additional work and opportunity for correct performance was provided.

Providing Individualized Feedback to Students.

The idea of providing individualized feedback to students appealed to all 17 respondents of the pilot study (100.00%). Most (14 respondents; 82.35%) indicated that a key to successful teaching was getting to

know individual students and tailoring messages to their needs, capacities, or personalities. Ten respondents (58.82%) took personal dispositions, personality, or other traits into account in providing feedback. Only 2 of the respondents (11.76%) indicated the need to recognize differences in student perceptions of feedback utility (2 respondents; 11.76%), confidentiality (1 respondent; 58.82%), and none (0.00%) mentioned retention. Instructors were keenly aware of the potential hazards of unfair feedback.

Again, the grading process intervened as instructors were hesitant to provide even factual information to individual students prior to testing but not hesitant after testing. In short, instructors were happy to provide feedback as long as it was accessible to the entire class. Individualized feedback was, in one respect or another, perceived as problematic by most instructors (10 respondents; 58.82%) when the possibility of interference in testing/grading became involved. Three respondents indicated that too much feedback, even when requested, showed favoritism (teacher's pet).

Adapting Feedback to the Nature of the Learning Task.

All respondents (100.00%) indicated that they did provide different kinds and quantities of feedback to students based on the task. Examination of their specific examples appeared to indicate that these tasks were actually different kinds of assignments and cognitive issues such as implicit and explicit learning, working vs. long-term memory tasks, or other distinctions that might be made regarding task differences in educational psychology were not mentioned.

Finally, all instructors who were interviewed (100.00%) considered their work in teaching students to be vitally important and that the use of feedback was instrumental in accomplishing their mission. While understandings of feedback processes and uses varied significantly, the dedication to using it effectively to benefit students (and to benefit their own performance as teachers) was emphasized throughout the interview process.

Conclusions and Implications

Substantial progress in understanding the process of feedback interventions for correcting performance has been made in recent years. Most instructors understand that evaluation of any type (including grades) directs attention away from the specific information relevant to improving task and directs it to meta-task issues. We also understand that students vary widely in traits that help or hinder the use of feedback. For example, attributional sensitivity to criticism can interfere with the process of correctly perceiving feedback. To this end,

practices such as skillful use of facework can be used to individualize feedback for those students. Other students require that substantial effort be devoted to convincing them that using specific instructional feedback will actually improve their performance. Finally, specific types of feedback (e.g., immediate vs. delayed) are best for specific cognitive tasks.

These distinctions do not appear to have filtered down to the level of most college instructors. Instructors report a preponderant use of evaluative feedback, scores, and grades with the belief that such feedback actually helps to improve performance. The rush to assign a point total to virtually all student behaviors prevents students from focusing on specific performance issues and directs their energies toward this secondary reinforcement. Some teachers appear to see their job as one of evaluating student performance with the expectation that such evaluations (scores, points, grades) will magically result in substantial learning improvements. Teachers continue to conflate positive and negative feedback. Feedback interventions are probably viewed most often as negative feedback rather than the more neutral understanding expressed in FIT.

Teachers in our study reported that they believe that feedback should be adapted to meet the needs of individual students, distinguished by their traits. Unfortunately, they have no means to distinguish these trait differences except their own intuition as naïve psychologists. At a minimum, teachers are aware that feedback can be threatening to many students and they are quite willing to seek means to reduce that threat as long as those means do not compromise the integrity and objectivity of their grading systems. Teachers seek to provide different forms of feedback, where possible, but tend to assign evaluative judgments to most of those forms. The best feedback (in terms of correspondence to FIT) appears to occur in office and after class conversations with individual students who seek help. This feedback is often considered to be the most rewarding form of feedback by teachers. Teachers generally do not think of feedback as an ongoing process in which they receive information that can help them improve their work; however, when they do consider this idea, they are very much open to it.

Finally, needless to say, these conclusions are based upon interviews with a small sample of instructors. They are filtered through the interpretive lens of one researcher who may have unwittingly introduced bias in the interviews or process of analysis. They are intended to provide a starting point for a more serious, substantial, and objective study of a process that is fundamental to the success of every teacher and college student.

Limitations of the Study.

We tested this study with a small population of convenience, and we interviewed only 17 respondents. A larger pool of participants and a randomly or more representative sample would provide more generalizable data.

We conducted in-person and telephone interviews. Interviews are an appropriate way to gather data from individuals about their experiences and values and to allow interviewees to give detailed information (McNamara, 1999). However, the open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed for the author and respondents' interpretation of the questions.

Future Research.

Future research would benefit this topic. First, future research would allow us to refine the interview questions and perhaps create a questionnaire to go alone with the interview—to allow us to triangulate our findings. Second, future research would allow us to expand our findings and identify if professors' feedback practices differ per the type of institute of higher education (i.e., community colleges, four-year colleges, public universities, and private universities).

Additional research might consider students' responses to feedback—to apply FIT from the recipient's observation. Other students create this approach—see Brannon & Knoblack (1982), Connors & Lunsford (1993), Giberson (2002), and Still & Koerber (2010). Considering student responses might also influence instructors' approaches to feedback and influence FIT.

Instructors might also benefit from research that applies FIT to various assignment genres: presentations as well as writing. Writing can serve diverse purposes— scientific documentation, creative expression, storytelling, technical writing, journalistic reporting, etc. Identifying if feedback differs per the type of assignment and delivery might help instructors to improve their feedback per the type of assignment, helping students more specifically improve their work.

Finally, future research might replicate past research related to instructor feedback and might test the methods of feedback, the primary factors of instructor response and student interpretation, and the content and tone of feedback. Future research may also consider if the mode of commenting—that is, feedback for digitally prepared work and virtual delivery—makes a difference in instructors' methods and in students' consideration and interpretation of different deliveries of feedback.

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Appendix

How important is feedback to classroom success?

List the various ways that you provide feedback to your students.

List the various means by which you receive feedback from your students.

In thinking about the ways that you provide feedback to your students, are grades an effective means of providing feedback?

Do you have formal assignments that students complete for which no grades are assigned? Please explain.

In testing, when students generate incorrect answers, do you explain to them why those answers are incorrect? How?

Do you provide individual feedback to individual students? How?

Here is an example of differentiated feedback: You tell one student, "This answer is clearly wrong and needs to be reworked in this manner," and another, "This answer shows you are moving in the right direction but should be reworked in this manner." You can differentiate feedback to be either direct and specific or to save face and correct the behavior using softer terms. You can be more evaluative with some students and more descriptive with others.

Do you differentiate feedback given to students based upon your knowledge of their personality, learning style, or tolerance for feedback?

Do you perceive that differentiated feedback creates issues of fairness or equity? If so, when?

Do you use different kinds of feedback (written versus oral, immediate versus delayed, descriptive versus evaluate) based on the nature of the task being learned?