Written feedback that promotes student learning: Effective & efficient strategies for responding to & evaluating student writing

Framing Questions:

1. How is effective feedback tied to other teaching elements such as course and assignment design?

2. What are your goals in giving feedback on student work and how does/should this inform the feedback you provide students?

3. What are the elements or characteristics of effective feedback? Are there any you can think of that might be specific to your discipline?

Practical Concerns:

1. What are the biggest challenges you face in giving effective feedback and what strategies do you use to overcome these?

2. What strategies have you found most effective for getting students to read and act on your feedback? How are these similar to and/or different from those on the handout, “Strategies for Effective and Efficient Feedback?”

3. How can we improve our feedback to students without burning out? How might the feedback mechanisms and tools below help us do so?
   a. Feedback Mechanisms and Tools: What are the affordances and constraints of the various kinds of feedback such as group, peer, online, paper, face-to-face, etc.?
   b. Rubrics: What makes for an effective rather than a reductive rubric? What might be the downside of rubrics and how might we address these potential problems?

Issues Relevant to our Teaching Context at the University of Toronto

1. Class size: How do we give effective feedback in very large classes?

2. TA Feedback: How can we help our TAs give the kind of feedback we want our students to receive?

3. English Language Learners: How, if at all, should we adapt our feedback practices for English language learners and international students?
Which of these strategies you have found most helpful and why? What additional strategies are available to us?

Strategies for Effective and Efficient Written Feedback

1. *Get a sense of the big picture first.* When you get the pile of assignments, don't just plunge in with your red pen or with typing away. Look through the whole set (ideally with your rubric or marking scale at hand) to get a sense of overall patterns. If you are co-marking with others, this is a good stage to meet and clarify expectations.

2. *Prioritize:* Make the most comments on the things you care about the most.

3. *Use a computer/mark online.* For final notes, computers are invaluable: you can erase and revise, your notes are legible, and you have a record of your remarks. Students see legible feedback as respectful of their work.

4. *Give praise and constructive criticism.* Let students know when you are convinced or interested by something they write. If you can't praise sincerely, describe partial success: "This paper summarizes the arguments of X and Y"; "You have put considerable effort into explaining your anomalous results"; "You show that you have understood the source material."

5. *Be specific about where you as a reader get confused.* The most important criticism you can make is that a statement is unclear, or that you can't follow the argument in a specific passage. Try to indicate exactly where you got lost, and why.

6. *Avoid* writing truncated marginal questions ("hunh?!" "really?!"), which can sound sarcastic or accusatory.

7. *Teach, don’t edit.* Correcting or noting *all* errors of style or grammar prevents students from taking responsibility for self-editing. It shows your annoyance, but it teaches very little. Pointing out two or three kinds of error can show the need to focus revision. If you don't feel competent to do language analysis, then don't try. Tell students they can ask for detailed feedback on style from Writing Centres if they want it (see #10).

8. *Correct/Edit selectively.* If you feel you must indicate the volume of errors in a student's writing, draw a line or a box around a segment of text (e.g. a middle paragraph), and circle the errors there. If the errors affect your grade, say so, but emphasize that your main focus is clarity of content and communication. And remember that pointing out errors is not the same as teaching language use.

9. *Less is More.* Don't write any more on the paper than the student can realistically read, understand, and apply.

10. *Direct students to appropriate resources* online or on campus where they can get additional help if they need it (see following page).

*Adapted from handout by Margaret Procter* http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty/responding-and-evaluating