Engage Online Students with Targeted Feedback

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Presented by:

Jill Schiefelbein

Over the past eight years, Jill has taken, taught and developed online courses. At Arizona State University, she worked in multiple capacities of online administration, including serving as the Director of Online Programs for ASU’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, where she developed the office of online programs and grew it into an organization with hundreds of online course offerings across dozens of academic units. Currently, Jill is the owner and guru of Impromptu Guru, a company focused on helping individuals and groups improve communication in both face-to-face and online environments.
Feedback Tips: Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are one great venue in which you can gather feedback from your students, and provide feedback for your students. You can also use discussion boards as a “hallway conversations” area that you open up for general commentary.

If your LMS doesn't have a discussion component built in, here is a list of free discussion board options:

Yahoo! Message Boards: http://messages.yahoo.com/
Aimoo: http://www.aimoo.com/
ProBoards: http://www.proboards.com/

Here are some sample questions you can post or use as prompts to gather feedback. Of course, if there is some incentive, students generally have a higher response rate. One idea is to have ten different feedback prompts during the session, and tell students that they get a point for each one they respond to, up to a certain amount.

- What is something that you’ve learned in the course so far that you’ve already implemented in your life (personal or professional)?
- What is your favorite part of the course so far?
- If you could change one thing about this course, what would it be?
- What is the most interesting reading or video from the course thus far?
- If you were to describe this class in one sentence to a friend, what would you say?
- Name one thing that you like that I, as your instructor, have done this session?
- If you were to design an ideal week in this course, what would it look like?
- What was (is) your experience with assignment XYZ?
Feedback Tips: Audio

Using audio tools is a great way to gather and give feedback. Audio tools create a more personalized channel for messaging, and often can take less time than typing out feedback in a discussion forum (depending on how fast you type, of course). It’s also a great channel to use when gathering feedback (and giving) because you can hear nonverbal communication through audio much more easily than you can read between the lines in text-based communication.

If your LMS doesn’t have an audio component built in, here is a list of audio options, both paid and free:

- VoiceThread: http://voicethread.com/
- Voxopop: http://www.voxopop.com/
- Audacity: http://audacity.sourceforge.net/
- AudioPal: http://audiopal.com

The questions presented in the first handout, Feedback Tips: Discussion Boards, are also good to use for audio feedback. Of course, with audio, you’ll get to hear your students’ tone of voice, so more controversial questions can be particularly helpful in this format, as feelings aren’t as easily masked.
Feedback Tips: VoiceThread Explained

One of my favorite tools for collecting feedback is VoiceThread. I showed a video clip created from VoiceThread responses in the seminar. This handout breaks down the basic elements of the VoiceThread, so you can decide if it will be useful for your classes. One thing I really like about using this technological tool is that students can decide which channel they want to use—text, audio or video.

This is the title, and shows how many slides or prompts are in the VoiceThread.

Each of these icons represents a unique response.

To record feedback, students may (icons from left to right):

- Call in and voice record feedback
- Use a webcam to record video feedback
- Record audio feedback using a computer mic
- Type in text-based feedback
Using Audio to Provide Personalized, Timely Feedback

By Rob Kelly

Online learners expect timely feedback on their assignments. They also need to feel the instructor’s presence. Kathy Damm, assistant professor of psychology at Nevada State College, uses a relatively simple technique to achieve both simultaneously.

In surveys, students typically say things such as “I felt like you were speaking to me” and “I felt like you were grading my paper, not just the spelling and grammar of my paper.”

Damm is a strong proponent of rubrics, which she uses in combination with her feedback on students’ assignments, and that feedback often takes the form of audio comments.

She converts each submitted writing assignment to a PDF file and reviews it online in that format. As she reads each assignment, she uses the audio recording feature of Adobe Acrobat Pro to record and insert brief audio comments (usually 30 seconds or less) in specific places within the document that tell the student how to improve his or her writing or what she liked about it. (While Adobe Acrobat Pro is needed to record the comments, it is not needed to hear them. The freely available Adobe Reader is all that is needed.)

This personalizes the feedback and creates a sense of instructor presence. Each assignment might have five or six audio clips. Although longer clips are possible, the inability to pause and rewind each comment can make lengthy comments less user-friendly. Each comment is spontaneous, to convey her personality and to reduce the amount of time spent on each writing assignment. “At first I thought I would list some bullet points for each assignment before making the recordings. It started to become very scripted and didn’t seem to maximize the audio format because I was pretty much reading what I had written. At that point the question became, why not just write it out for them? Then I started to do more off-the-cuff comments,” Damm says.

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Tips from the Pros

Blended Learning: Suggestions for What to Do Before, During, and After F2F Sessions

Blended learning course design is not a simple matter of conducting part of a course online and part of it face-to-face. To create an effective blended course, it is important to use technology in ways that take advantage of both modes before, during, and after face-to-face meetings. In the recent Magna Online Seminar Ten Ways to Improve Blended Learning Design, Ike Shibley, associate professor of chemistry at Penn State Berks, offered the following suggestions for appropriate use of technology at the various stages of a blended course:

- The goal before class is often to ensure that students interact with the content at the lowest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. This can include multiple-choice quizzes, straightforward homework, and reflections about reading.
- During class, aim for the middle of Bloom’s Taxonomy, using technology such as clickers to help students apply information rather than learning it for the first time.
less polished, students appreciate it. “I make little mistakes. I’ll be reading the paper and say, ‘Oh, this is great. I’m thinking ... No, wait. Never mind, I don’t want you to do that. What I want you to do instead is ... ’ I interrupt myself as I might if we were in [face-to-face] office hours. I feel a little less professional about it, but the students like it. They say they could tell what I was thinking. They could almost hear the thoughts coming,” Damm says.

In surveys, students typically say things such as “I felt like you were speaking to me” and “I felt like you were grading my paper, not just the spelling and grammar of my paper.”

As for efficiency, Damm says, she doesn’t feel as “bogged down” in the process as she does when using more conventional techniques such as Track Changes or marking up assignments manually, so she is able to provide more timely feedback.

There are other technologies that enable instructors to speak directly to their students. For example, Damm tried a similar approach using Jing to create narrated screencasts as she graded students’ assignments. Jing enabled her to point out things with her cursor and explain herself clearly; however, this approach was less user-friendly because it did not enable her to start and stop, which produced screencasts that lasted as long as it took her to read the assignment and included periods of silence as she read. As a result, students were less likely to listen to the comments.

Inserting audio comments does not serve every feedback function, and Damm uses text comments for grammar and general writing rules. In addition, she finds that Track Changes works better for some assignments: for example, one in which students write a methods section for a hypothetical journal article and the feedback is focused on fine-tuning organization and format.

“The audio files are about content, and when I would do Track Changes a lot of my students would write back and say, ‘I feel like you gave me a lot of feedback on how to improve my writing in terms of punctuation, but I don’t understand why I got a C.’ And I’d say, ‘You didn’t direct your argument. You didn’t back it up,’ but that isn’t really easily conveyed in the Track Changes environment. I like the fact that this way I can focus on the content, which is what I want them to master in these assignments.”

In addition, text-based comments can seem less personal to students. “We see our students make the most common mistakes, so we have automated responses. Even when we’re writing with our own hand, we often use shorthand phrases such as ‘You need to have a new paragraph here’ and we tell them later, ‘I used this symbol because a lot of you did that.’ We are automating whenever possible so we can eliminate the time suck, but it often feels very automated. If you give them feedback directed to them personally, it reduces some of those barriers that I think naturally develop in the online classroom.”

For a demonstration of how to embed audio comments in a PDF document using the audio feature of Adobe Acrobat, see http://youtu.be/994JjPHHgiU.
Online or In Class?

Online course offerings continue to grow. In 2006, experts (cited in the article referenced below) were estimating that some 2,000 major universities and colleges were offering online/Web-based courses, enrolling more than 5 million students. And that was 2006. As experience with online education grows, the opportunity for learning from that experience grows as well. Highlighted below are findings from a study that examined business student perceptions of college-level online courses.

Using a five-point Likert-type scale, this 800-student cohort indicated whether online courses were more or less difficult than regular classes, whether online courses provided poor or good learning experiences, and whether they were happy or unhappy that they had taken an online course, among other items. On a second portion of the questionnaire, they compared learning in traditional classrooms to the amount of learning in online courses, whether it was easier to cheat in online courses, and whether they thought students who completed online coursework would have the same job opportunities as students who didn’t.

“Data analyses revealed that for the most part, the students did not hold polarized opinions regarding the online courses they had completed.” (p. 243) Mean responses for the first seven items on the questionnaire ranged from 3.05 to 3.51, “indicating relatively neutral overall attitudes toward the online course experiences.” (p. 243) The second part of the questionnaire identified some different perceptions between students who had and had not taken an online course. For example, students who hadn’t taken an online course thought it would be easier to cheat in online courses than students who had taken one (3.19 mean for those not taking an online course versus 2.75 for those who had taken one).

Researchers were concerned about one finding. “What is rather disquieting is the fact that approximately one-third of the students who had completed at least one online course expressed negative attitudes toward or negative perceptions of online education.” (p. 246) They call for more research to understand the bases for these negative attitudes and perceptions.

Online courses are clearly part of higher education’s future. With the experience of offering them accumulating, it’s time to explore questions like these and others, for example: Which courses should be offered online? What’s an appropriate balance between online course and in-class courses, or does it matter? Who benefits most and least from taking online courses? Should some students (maybe beginning students in various at-risk categories) be advised against taking online courses? Are all faculty “good” online teachers?


Maryellen Weimer is the editor of The Teaching Professor.

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• After class, focus on critical thinking at the highest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. This can include Web assignments such as critical evaluations of information on the Web, creation of new information such as a Wiki, and blogs.

For information about ordering an archive of this online seminar, go to www.magnapubs.com/catalog/ten-ways-to-improve-blended-course-design/.
Understanding learners’ experiences in the online classroom can help you improve your courses for current and future students and help build a strong learning community. Jill Schiefelbein, owner and guru of Impromptu Guru, a company focused on helping individuals and groups improve communication in both face-to-face and online environments, recommends using a reciprocal feedback process to elicit this valuable information from students.

"I always make sure to ask a yes-or-no question followed by why or why not? It balances quantitative and qualitative feedback. At the very least, students will answer that quantitative question. You’ll get some feedback, and the vast majority will also follow up with responses."

Schiefelbein provides quarterly feedback to students, what she refers to as "email check-ins," letting students know where they stand in the course. In these emails, she also asks students the following questions:

- How has your experience been with the organization of the course and the course materials?
- How have you found the discussion questions in helping you understand the course content? Have they been helpful? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else that you’d like to add about your experience in the class? If you’re having any difficulties or if you’re enjoying a particular part of the course, I’d really love to hear about that.

“I always make sure to ask a yes-or-no question followed by why or why not? It balances quantitative and qualitative feedback. At the very least, students will answer that quantitative question. You’ll get some feedback, and the vast majority will also follow up with responses,” Schiefelbein says.

Schiefelbein replies to each of these feedback responses from students. In low-enrollment courses, she sends personalized emails. In high-enrollment courses, she uses a form email that says, "Thank you so much for contributing your feedback. This feedback helps me fine-tune this class not only for you but for other students in the future. Thank you for being part of that effort. As always, if you have any questions, please continue to ask.”

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Informal feedback

Beyond the quarterly check-ins, Schiefelbein recommends checking in less formally at regular intervals, which “lets the students know that I care about them as individuals, not just [as] numbers who are enrolled in the course.”

One way she accomplishes this is through engaging with students in “hallway conversations.” Each of Schiefelbein’s online courses has an area where these informal conversations take place. “It’s supposed to mimic what students might talk about in the hallway before class starts or after class ends,” she says.

When topics come up in these hallway conversations, Schiefelbein will mention them in a text or voice announcement. “I’ll post an announcement that says, ‘Check out the hallway conversation area and chime in on the discussion about …’ and I’ll give the subject line of whatever discussion is relevant. A more organic type of feedback emerges.”

In some instances, students will use these hallways conversations to ask one another about assignments or topics that they are struggling with. Schiefelbein responds to these questions and asks other students to share their experiences or offer help. And because of the culture that she fosters in the course, students respond. “Once you foster this community of feedback, you have other students chiming in, feeling a part of this community, feeling this reciprocal relationship with the instructor and with other students in the class and wanting one other to succeed. If you have students in this culture of feedback you’ve created actively participating, it really works to foster that sense of community, and I’ve had many students comment that they feel that they had more input, more agency, and more control over their learning. And I think when students feel that they are in control of their learning, they feel that they have more responsibility to do that learning.”

Audiovisual feedback

Another way that Schiefelbein elicits student feedback is by inviting them to offer their comments and suggestions via audio and video. (Because of the extra effort involved, she offers students extra credit for doing this.) “It’s nice because I get to see them. It establishes a more personal connection with the students. It’s surprising to me with some of the better students I’ve had just how much of a connection I can build via email; however, being able to hear their voices and see their faces just makes the relationship grow even more,” she says.

In addition to helping strengthen relationships, the audiovisual format can improve the quality of the feedback. “When a student is putting a video out there that may be viewed by other people, I believe it causes him or her to think more critically about what he or she is saying. And I think that’s very beneficial. You can put something on a discussion board in 30 seconds, but if you’re going to be on camera, you’re going to think more consciously about what you’re saying and what you’re contributing. It takes some of that anonymity out of the equation. Once you put an image or likeness or voice behind that feedback, it gets a little more real for them, and you have less of an anonymous presence,” Schiefelbein says.

Benefits of student feedback

Opening your teaching and course design to student critique can be a daunting prospect, but doing so strengthens the learning community, and students provide information and suggestions that can improve the learning for current and future students. “I was initially scared by what type of feedback would come back to me. I didn’t want to open a Pandora’s Box when I started this. What I found when I got over that and started asking for feedback was that the comments I received from students, both positive and negative, were communicated respectfully. Students felt agency. They felt more involved in the class,” Schiefelbein says.

Student suggestions can also save time. For example, Schiefelbein produced a video to provide students with assignment guidelines. It turned out that students thought that a simple bulleted list would have been more effective, something she might not have become aware of if she had not fostered a culture of reciprocal feedback.

For more information

On June 19 Jill Schiefelbein will lead the Magna Online Seminar Engage Online Students with Targeted Feedback. For information, go to www.magnapubs.com/catalog/engage-online-students-with-targeted-feedback/. 
Crucial for Online Educators: Knowing Your Student Audience!

By Errol Craig Sull

It can be easy to overlook the individuality of our students. We must not let this happen, because the more students feel we care about them as Cathy or Romar or Billy or Jose or Alijad or Marie or Logan or Asaka or whoever, not merely as “students,” the better we engage, reach, and motivate each student in our courses.

These suggestions will help ensure that your course speaks to each student.

Read student introductions thoroughly. These will give you insight into their lives and help guide your instruction. Perhaps the most candid—and thus most revealing—of students’ writing is in the first week, when they introduce themselves. They will offer tidbits on their backgrounds, which can give you a quick picture of the students in your course. And despite being in the same course, their ages, interests, educational levels, family situations, professional backgrounds, etc., will differ. This information becomes especially helpful when interacting one-on-one with students.

Pay attention to student demographic information provided by your school and supervisors. This is the area of information about the student audience most ignored by the online educator. With so much to do in a class, it is easy to overlook emails and attachments on the overall background of students that school staff and supervisors send out. (Note: FERPA prohibits schools from sending out such information on individual students.) This information can be very helpful, not only in understanding the overall audience picture of your class but also in allowing for various teaching strategies and activities for you to shore up areas where your students may appear to be weak. Suggestion: keep a separate file for these, and refer to it throughout your course for reminders.

Adjust your vocabulary to meet students’ understanding. With rare exceptions, online educators come into a class with more knowledge on their subject and a richer vocabulary than their students. One can quickly forget that students may not understand much of an online educator’s vocabulary, thought processes, or explanations. Certainly, we want our students to stretch their minds, and this includes introducing them to new words and ideas. But there is a point where this can overwhelm and alienate a student.

Keep in mind the number one online teaching rule—you teach for the student. While we as online educators are crucial linchpins in our courses, the courses we teach are never about us—they are always about the student. There will be times when sharing some of our experiences, thoughts on our subject, and observations on course efforts are helpful and often crucial. But students do not enjoy it when an instructor goes on and on and on about him- or herself or includes theories, approaches, and philosophies that either seem irrelevant to the course or overwhelm the students with too much information. A good approach is to place yourself in the student’s role: how much would you like to read, and when would enough be enough?

Reach out to your students’ professional worlds. This is a great way to strengthen the online educator-student bond while also offering information for a student’s professional interests. In addition to what students post in their first-week introductions, various discussion threads and questions in emails can result in a clear picture of each student’s major, current employment (if any), and professional goals. When you send the student information...
The discussion board in Kathleen Lowney’s large hybrid section of introduction to sociology at Valdosta State University wasn’t serving its intended purpose of engaging learners with the content and preparing them for face-to-face class sessions. She tried dividing the students into smaller discussion groups of 50 and then 20, and the results were the same: the weaker students waited until the last minute and essentially repeated what the better students had posted previously. When she replaced the public discussions with private journals, the quality of students’ posts improved, as did their grades.

“I began to notice that the academically stronger students would post early; the weaker students tended to post in the last 12 hours of a seven-day window, and many of their posts, while not quite taken word-for-word from the stronger students, were pretty close. It looked [as though] they were waiting for the stronger students to post in these open discussions to figure out what the answers were. Not everybody was engaging with the material in the way that I wanted them to engage with it,” Lowney says.

She also observed that students who posted earlier and engaged in original thinking did better on tests. Even in smaller groups the same “free rider” problem occurred, and Lowney had the additional problem of managing multiple discussions. (While Blackboard makes it easy to divide students into groups and present the same discussion prompt, knowing which comment students made in which group proved to be a challenge.)

Lowney now assigns a private prewrite, which asks students to apply concepts. Students do not see each other’s posts, and Lowney responds to each, offering comments that help prepare for the in-class discussion.

She also says that this format has improved students’ engagement with the material. “I wouldn’t say the weaker students are always a lot stronger than they were, but what I’m seeing is that my weaker students’ test scores have made a steady improvement from when I had the open, public discussion,” Lowney says.

In addition to improved test scores, Lowney has observed improved interaction in the face-to-face sessions. “Classes are much more engaging because I know that they’ve had to read the material before and engage with it,” Lowney says. “I’m getting more questions in class because I’m priming the pump with my comments.”

Of course, making these prewrites private eliminates the benefits of writing for and receiving feedback from peers. One way that Lowney addresses this issue is by sharing (anonymously) sample private prewrites in class, highlighting common mistakes and things done well. “I’ll build that into my PowerPoint and say, ‘This is something that cropped up a lot.’ Most students will see their work at some point in one of the PowerPoints, and I’ll share good examples as well, especially early in the semester so that I can model a successful answer and ask students to tear it apart and see what made it successful,” Lowney says.

These private prewrites are more work for the students and the instructor. Responding to each prewrite is quite time-intensive for Lowney, particularly in such high-enrollment courses. And one of the challenges is providing feedback to students before the in-class discussion. “If you’re not able to get them

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tion specific to his or her professional world not found in the course, it goes a long way in saying, “I’m really in touch with who and what you are, and I want to help you become better at our subject so you can truly succeed.”

**Be relevant in your information; don’t seem out of touch.** All folks have comfort zones in their experiences and interests; it is easy to immediately pull these out for discussion. But are they relevant to your subject in the 21st century? Can your students identify with the items you share? An online educator can be an expert in his or her subject area and offer substantial educational and professional experience in the field, but if the students feel their educator is offering “old” ideas, comparisons, analogies, or stories, then the students might question the relevance of course materials.

**Share mistakes you made and obstacles you faced in the course subject area.** While we may have more knowledge, education, and experience than our students, we certainly are susceptible to mistakes and stumbles. By sharing some of our missteps and errors in our subject and our ways of correcting our missteps and errors in our and stumbles. By sharing some of the certain are susceptible to mistakes experience than our students, we make, we can take this a step further by asking students to post in a discussion or send us emails on why they are taking the course and how they want the course to help them, now and after the class. This results in more insight into the students’ worlds and thus more opportunities to teach to the students’ goals and to post resources to further assist them.

**Create a bank of comments from students related to audiences for future courses.** Each course brings us more information from our students on their makeup, on what they need from the course, on their fears and anxieties about taking the course, on their past educational and professional experiences, etc. When something comes along from this that results in new strategies, resources, discussion questions, assignments, and/or activities, be sure to save them in a separate file for use with students in future courses.

**Use ongoing self-reflection to keep your audience approach on target.** Our enthusiasm to do everything right in a course can result in fantastic efforts on our part in the first few weeks of the course—and this includes paying attention to the audience we are teaching. Yet the many responsibilities of our course and our life beyond it can cause us to lose sight of our student demographic. So we should continually remind ourselves of our students’ individual needs, the importance of each student. When we do, our students will leave our courses with much richer learning experiences.

**REMEMBER: Advertisers know the importance of reaching their target audiences—and it results in billions of products sold, millions of people employed, and thousands of companies thriving.**

Please let me hear from you, including your suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errolcraigsull@aol.com. And remember: please forward me your computer tips and suggestions to make teaching in the online classroom more efficient and productive.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 18 years and has a national reputation on the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book, *How to Become the Perfect Online Instructor.*