

Beyond the Grade: Feedback on Student Behavior

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Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.

-Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1991, p. 121)

Feedback is a special case of the general communication process that constitutes part of our ethical duty as psychology instructors (Ethical Standard 7.06; APA, 2002). Although instructors generally use grading tests and assignments as their primary academic feedback to students, value exists in other forms of feedback as well. For instance, some student behaviors that may warrant feedback include:

- Sally was unprepared for class discussions because she had not done the readings.
- Ralph often came 10-15 minutes late to class.
- Kyle monopolized the instructor's office hours to complain and argue about grades.
- John interrupted the instructor frequently to call out comments or ask questions.
- Karen rarely spoke in class despite having many excellent ideas to share.
- Todd dominated class discussions, often telling long-winded stories about his family.
- Jill missed classes, assignments, and tests, which the syllabus stated could not be made up.

Two Functions of Feedback on Student Behavior

Feedback to students serves two distinct yet potentially complementary functions: (a) fostering students' individual growth, and (b) maintaining a productive classroom environment for the benefit of all students.

Student Growth

Instructors are in a unique position to provide feedback that assists students in their academic performance and helps them to grow, mature, and learn about themselves. For instance, Sally is more likely to increase her academic engagement if an instructor gives her effective feedback regarding her lack of preparation. Often such feedback may help students form a positive self image and increase their sense of efficacy both within and beyond the classroom (Milan, Parish, & Reichgott, 2006).

Classroom Environment

College teachers owe it to all students in a class to not let other peers dominate, disrupt, or demand special privileges (Wilson & Hackney, 2006), like Ralph, whose frequent lateness taints the classroom environment for everyone. A skilled instructor who handles the situation respectfully may be able to accomplish two goals simultaneously: teaching difficult students how they present to others (which may help them interpersonally) and concomitantly protecting the class from undue intrusions.

Setting the Stage for Feedback: Three Ideas

There are two main steps in the feedback process: setting the stage and feedback delivery. If we want to set the stage so that students hear our feedback, it is crucial to first establish rapport with them (e.g., Buskist & Saville, 2004). Here are three ideas for enhancing rapport with students as we set the stage for

feedback delivery.

“Please See Me”

Rapport starts with the way instructors ask students for a meeting. Specifically, students who receive a note on their test saying “Please see me” are more likely to be offended, angry, or anxious than are students who receive the following, more explicit note: “I would like to help you understand this material. Please see me” (Perrine & King, 2004). Students who receive the clearer note are more likely to be grateful and perceive the instructor as helpful and caring, leading to the potential for a more productive meeting.

Two examples of explicit notes teachers can write to students (or say if they prefer to communicate verbally) in a private communication are:

“You are not currently passing the class. Please come see me in my office to work on improvement.”
[Goal: give students feedback about their academic work.]

“Lately you have seemed frustrated in this class. Please come to my office to discuss what we can do to improve your experience in this course.” [Goal: give students feedback about some facet of their academic behavior.]

The Individual Feedback Meeting

Rather than singling out specific students via a note, teachers may find it valuable in small classes (if they are lucky enough to teach any) to schedule a mid-semester meeting with each student individually. Some instructors build the meeting times into their course syllabus. In these meetings, teachers can give specific behavioral feedback regarding performance in the course, including “growth edges,” such as encouraging those who are quiet to participate more actively in class or asking dominating students to limit their calling out. What makes these meetings useful is that instructors can share corrective feedback face to face in a safe setting and can build the topic of “feedback” into the course content itself (especially in psychology classes such as Counseling Skills or Group Dynamics). To further enhance the meeting, teachers can encourage students to give them concrete feedback about their performance (the way they come across in the classroom) and how the course is working for the students.

Empathic Highlights

Actively listen. Once students arrive at an instructor’s office for a meeting, either in response to a request to talk with them or at their own request, teachers can build rapport through reflective listening. The first step in this process entails actively listening to the student’s story or point of view, which will emerge during the dialogue. As the student responds to the teacher’s open-ended questions, teachers can ask themselves “What are the main points here?” or “What is most important to this student?” (Egan, 2006) and try to form a hypothesis or educated guess about what the student is thinking and feeling.

Express Your Understanding. After teachers grasp the key elements of what the student has said, the next step is to express an empathic understanding in a form such as “You feel ... [guess how the student might be feeling] because ... [paraphrase the situation that you think gave rise to these feelings].” Empathic highlights would likely be useful with Kyle, the grade complainer, to whom an instructor could say something like, “I understand that you feel disappointed because you did not receive the grade you were hoping for,” which may diffuse some of his anger and grade-related arguing. Using empathic

highlights conveys respect for the student's experience and thus even translate into increased student motivation and learning (Wilson, 2006).

Feedback Delivery: Two General Strategies

Once teachers have successfully set the stage and established rapport with a student, here are two strategies they can use to deliver effective feedback regarding the student's behavior.

The Assertive Statement

Giving behavioral feedback requires a type of assertiveness (Paterson, 2000), except instead of the classic "I-statements," instructors are often speaking on behalf of the class — so they can say "the class" or "the other students" to give the statement more social power.

The steps to crafting an effective assertive statement are:

- Describe the student's behavior objectively, using concrete information and focusing on the behavior rather than on the person (Brinko, 1993; Egan, 2006), e.g., "When you interrupt me and call out in class..."
- Describe how the student's behavior impacts you and/or the other students in the class, e.g., "...I am unable to respond to you" or "...it is disruptive to the other students."
- Specify one or two observable behavior changes a teacher would like the student to make, e.g., "If possible, instead of interrupting, I would prefer if you could write down your questions or comments to discuss with me after class."
- Finally, provide specific positive feedback to the student whenever they successfully perform the requested behaviors; this will bolster their self-efficacy (Egan, 2006), e.g., "I appreciate your not interrupting me today. Do you have any questions for me?"

The Bleep Sandwich

Feedback is more effective when negative information is "sandwiched" between positive information (Brinko, 1993). For instance, one of us requested a meeting with John after the first week of class during which the student interrupted the instructor about 10 times to call out or ask questions. He conveyed the following to John in the meeting (note the assertive statement embedded between positive feedback statements):

I enjoy your contributions to the class already, John, and it is clear that you are a bright and motivated student. There have been many times in the first week, however, when you called out inappropriately in class, and this is disruptive to me and the other students. If you have your hand up and I choose not to call on you, it is because my goal for the class is to give everyone a full chance to participate in class discussion. In those instances, instead of calling out, would it be possible for you to write your questions down to ask me after class? That way, I'd be able to give your good questions the attention they deserve.

John responded by stating that he had received similar feedback in other classes but without constructive suggestions for how to change the disruptive behavior. He employed the idea of writing down his questions and subsequently reported that this strategy worked well for him in many of his classes.

Feedback Delivery: Specific Strategies

Once the two main steps in the feedback process — setting the stage and feedback delivery — have been implemented, there are more specific considerations to keep in mind depending upon which of the two functions of feedback are being addressed.

Student Growth

Teaching Responsibility

Students' receptivity to feedback (and hence growth) may be undermined by their tendency to blame others for their behavior. The essential first step in feedback with such students is assisting them in assuming responsibility for their own situation. Teachers can explain to students that, even if 99 percent of the problems in the class are due to other students, the main issue they can help them with is the 1 percent that they can directly control. For instance, when a teacher gave corrective feedback to Karen that she had been passive in class despite her obvious intelligence, she complained of dominant classmates (like Todd) who prevented her participation. After empathizing with her frustration, the teacher said: "I understand that most of this situation may be out of your control, and I will certainly do my part to reign in the dominators. I wonder also, what can you do, Karen, to get more out of this class?" Karen acknowledged that her own shyness was a factor, and her teacher brainstormed possible remedies with her, such as seeking counseling or starting with simple questions in class (e.g., requesting clarification) to work gradually toward increasing her classroom participation. Teaching responsibility also was effective with Kyle, the grade complainer, who came to realize that some of his frustration was due to his own lack of study skills (a solvable problem) rather than the tests or grading system.

Teaching Students How They Present

Another important component in helping students grow as individuals is to provide them with honest feedback about how they present to others — in other words, how the student is perceived by the instructor or the other students in the class. Todd's (the dominating student) teacher gave him feedback only after building a sound relationship with him outside the classroom. She explained to him that, while she enjoyed his passion, many students indicated that they found Todd's stories excessive and wanted to hear more from the instructor and other students. She then asked Todd to monitor his storytelling more carefully in class (e.g., only telling one story per week and writing the others down to hand in after class), which he did. Todd later shared that this feedback helped him connect with other students more easily.

Classroom Environment

The Exception Contract

Inevitably, life impacts students during the academic semester, and a teacher may legitimately decide to make an exception for a student in crisis. What a teacher may not know at the time is that this student will repeatedly be in "crisis" and will ask for more exceptions, and other students will inevitably notice this unfair situation. Some instructors have students sign a contract when they make a one-time exception stating: "I am aware that the instructor is making an exception this one time and I will not ask for more exceptions this semester for any reason." In our experience, this strategy has been effective on two counts: It conveys a clear message to the student (and the class) that the exception will not be a pattern, and it gives the instructor concrete documentation of the agreement, which is a good idea in dealing with problem students.

Pattern Detection.

If teachers find themselves teaching a student who continually undermines the classroom environment, it may be useful to learn more about this student so they can provide accurate and more effective feedback. If instructors have access to the student's transcript or know which classes he or she has taken, they can ask past teachers about any strategies that were helpful for that student (such as the feedback to John, above). Note that this suggestion is permissible under The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), because there is a legitimate educational interest at stake (see <http://www.epic.org/privacy/education/ferpa.html>, subsection b1A).

Putting the Pieces Together: Jill

Jill was a student for whom pattern detection came in handy. She was a difficult student throughout her Personality class, missing classes, assignments, and tests with alarming regularity and demanding special privileges and exceptions due to her many "crises." Her teacher's mistake as a young instructor was not providing careful feedback to Jill using the steps we have outlined. Jill decided to take another class with this teacher, likely due to his initially permissive stance with her. Fortunately, the second time, the instructor detected the pattern the first week of class and immediately sent Jill the following e-mail; the specific strategies used are noted in squared parentheses following each sentence:

I appreciate having you in my class this semester, Jill, as I very much enjoy your participation and interest [begin with positive feedback]. I just want to be clear with you about the lateness, absence, and make-up policies for the class. In this first week, you arrived late to class twice, missed one class, and handed in your homework a day late [assertive statement, Step 1: specify the problem behavior]. When you come late, it is disruptive to me and the entire class, and it is unfair to the other students for me to accept your late assignments [assertive statement, Step 2: describe the behavior's impact on the other students]. If you want to make a full contribution to the class and receive the grade you deserve, it is important that you do your best to attend class more regularly and hand in assignments/homework by the due dates [assertive statement, Step 3: outline the desired behavior change]. I understand that this may feel frustrating to you because you frequently have difficult situations in your life that are out of your control [an empathic highlight]. While I enjoy your participation and your academic potential [end with positive feedback], if you are not able to make this class a priority, it would be best to drop the class while you still can do so easily. If you decide to commit to Abnormal Psychology this semester despite the difficulties you are facing outside the classroom [teach responsibility], please reply to this e-mail indicating that you fully understand these conditions [a modified exception contract].

Jill elected to stay in the class and improved virtually all problem behaviors, with her teacher complimenting her each time she came to class early and handed in her assignments on time.

Conclusion

Giving behavioral feedback to students that goes beyond their course grade is a critical skill for instructors. Not only is it valuable to help students develop and grow interpersonally, but it also is an educator's job to protect other students from the destructive behaviors of a few individuals. Both goals — to educate and to protect — can be simultaneously achieved by employing effective strategies, such as crafting assertive statements, giving "bleep sandwiches," implementing specific contracts, and teaching students to be responsible for their own classroom behaviors.

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