



Teaching Scholars Institute:

Giving Prompt Feedback

A collection of teaching strategies introduced
by teaching scholars from:

Murray State University

University of Tennessee–Martin

Western Kentucky University

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Teaching Scholars: Giving Prompt Feedback

The Teaching Scholars Institute (TSI) consists of faculty members selected by Deans at Murray State University (MSU), Western Kentucky University (WKU), and University of Tennessee—Martin (UT Martin) for their innovative teaching approaches. The mission of the Teaching Scholars Institute is to foster communication among the universities and to develop a record of effective teaching strategies.

The Teaching Scholars Institute held its fourth meeting at Murray State University on February 23, 2007, to discuss Chickering's fourth principle of effective teaching: **“Good practice gives prompt feedback.”** The faculty first met in small groups based on their discipline to discuss how they provide prompt feedback to their students and receive feedback in return.

Discipline Groups included:

- Business
- Health and Science
- Humanities and Fine Arts
- Social Sciences/Education

After coming together to discuss each group's findings, the instructors divided into small groups based on special interest topics, such as civic engagement and upper division classes.

Topic Groups included:

- Civic Engagement / Technology
- General Education/Large Classes
- Special Issues (e.g., Legal Issues, Disability, etc.)
- Upper Division Classes

The findings presented in this report highlight the success stories that the instructors shared during the day. The faculty members offered innovative approaches to providing prompt feedback to students and to receiving prompt feedback from students.

The report provides the members' responses to five discussion questions covering this year's theme.

1. How do you define prompt feedback?
2. Share examples of activities that permit you to provide prompt feedback
3. Share techniques, technologies or structures for providing prompt feedback to students
4. Do you employ methods for students to provide feedback to you?
5. How do you assess whether feedback mechanisms are adequate?

Discussion Questions for the TSI Groups

The Teaching Scholars Institute members were provided with five questions to prompt their discussions on the theme, “Good practice gives prompt feedback”:

1. How do you define prompt feedback?
2. Share examples of activities that permit you to provide prompt feedback
3. Share techniques, technologies or structures for providing prompt feedback to students
4. Do you employ methods for students to provide feedback to you?
5. How do you assess whether feedback mechanisms are adequate?

1. How do you define prompt feedback?

The TSI members realized that they would have to examine feedback in two major forms: the feedback that faculty provide to students, and the feedback that students provide to faculty.

Feedback as Signals

The Humanities Group first set out to agree on a definition for prompt feedback. Susan Edington, Education professor at MSU, suggested that feedback is different from assessment. Marcie Johnson, English professor at MSU, asked if feedback could just be in the form of comments. She stated, “I believe that feedback is any signal that alerts me as to how students act, think, and do.” Robyn Swanson, music instructor at WKU, stated that feedback with an answer goes to higher levels; questions lead to evaluations as broad types of feedback.

Feedback as Positive Reinforcement

The type of feedback depends upon the situation. A repeated theme of the conversation was the necessity for being positive and supportive of the students’ efforts. David Durr, MSU, makes sure to thank each student for every question asked in class. He wants to encourage students to continue asking questions.

Feedback as Formal and Informal Communication

Mary Lemons, UT Martin, described that she sees a difference between providing prompt feedback to graduate students versus undergraduate students. Formal and informal feedback is conducted differently among the two groups. In both cases, however, informal communication provides more prompt feedback during class time. Prompt, informal feedback is given all the time. Even wrong answers provided by students offer an opportunity to give feedback and help the students learn the material. Mark Staynings, WKU, agreed with Lemons, stating that prompt feedback is needed to pull students back from going down a wrong path. Mark Staynings gently redirects the conversation when students ask questions that are not directly on the related path of the material being covered.

2. Share examples of activities that permit you to provide prompt feedback.

Class Discussions and Board Exercises

TSI members discussed methods of involving students in class discussion and exercises. While Mark Staynings calls on students to work problems on the board, David Durr prefers to let students self-identify themselves to ask questions and discuss their answers to problems. Both agreed that it is

important to clearly state the instructors' expectations at the beginning of the semester so that students will be prepared to discuss problems, regardless of the instructor's preferred method.

Environment and Expectations

Students' anxiety and class size can influence their willingness to participate in class discussions and exercises. As a result, it is important to encourage students to give their opinions and answers, even though they may be wrong. The group members all agreed that as instructors, they must create an environment where students know they are expected to provide feedback in class.

Learning styles, as noted by Lemons, can also influence the effectiveness of hands-on exercises. However, with more activities, the students' comfort level should increase. Staynings agreed, adding that incorporating various types of activities—writing, drawing, etc.—would also help meet the needs of students with different learning styles.

Use of Essays as Assessment with Feedback

The General Education/Large Classes Interest Group discussed how labor intensive it can be to provide feedback on essays. After venturing into the realm of giving an essay exam, Ervin Briones, psychology instructor at UT Martin, has decided that a written test is too labor intensive when the class size is 60 students. "I couldn't give them feedback right away—not because of the content, but because of the poor grammar/English skills." Marcie Johnson, MSU English instructor, suggested that he focus on the content and simply leave a note addressing the major type of grammatical error.

Marcie offers students the chance to come sit with her up until a month before the essay is due—if they're willing to turn the essay in early and have it graded then and there—then she gives them the opportunity to revise it for a higher grade. Only about 25% of the students usually take her up on her offer. (She has also learned that with the possibility of endless revisions, some students will take advantage and turn in trash knowing that they were going to get the benefit of the instructor helping to re-write the essay.) Still, the revision gives some students a sense of hope and gives them the responsibility to bring up their grade.

Paul Bush suggested his method for conducting group essays. Assign groups in Blackboard where only members of the group can access that group's postings. Each student is responsible for submitting six quotes from the play along with a detailed explanation of how each quote supports the thesis of the group essay. One student will volunteer to collect these quotes in order to create an essay, with each member having the opportunity to see the rough draft online in order to make suggestions. The instructor is grading only one essay per group, but has the opportunity to look at the quotes and explanations submitted in order to subtract points from the essay grade for students who either submitted nothing or gave few or weak supporting explanations.

Community Service/ Civic Engagement Group

Amy Simmons (UT Martin) discussed her concern that there is a disconnect between students' knowledge and their skills, and she would like to help them see the connection and use their knowledge and skills together during community service activities. As a music instructor, she arranges student performances for the community and encourages her students to examine the impact that they are having on their society.

Robyn Swanson, music instructor at WKU, described the instrument "petting zoo" event that her students hold for elementary students. After concerts that her music education students perform at the

public schools, students are invited to come up and touch the instruments. This has been great for the elementary students.

The group discussed concerns and challenges such as location and culture. Rural environments can have diverse cultural and educational divides. One way of affecting the culture is to involve the youth. Parents are then often influenced indirectly.

Julie Floyd, nursing instructor at UT Martin, described the Youth Town project that she conducts with her students. Based on the needs of the youth at Youth Town, the student pairs will develop a project and provide presentations on topics such as drugs, alcohol, and STDs. Such projects also have positive impacts on the students as they see that they have value and skills to offer.

Dana Manley, nursing professor at MSU, believes that it is great to use students to influence the community. Dr. Manley's students perform assessments on older adults' living situations. The students develop plans and evaluate outcomes, such as mobility and flexibility. The students are assessed in a structured way by the professor being physically present. The professor provides feedback to students on their written objectives and goals and their interaction with clients.

Murray State professor, David Durr, wrote a grant to develop a curriculum for community members to study financial planning. The objective of this service learning course is to develop a financial planning project. The curriculum would benefit churches, food banks, and rural populations, for example.

The group discussed the domino effect of community service and civic engagement. Working in the community and with the youth, in particular, can change a generation.

"You don't just change one life; you change a generation."

—David Durr, Murray State University

Students catch the importance of the community service they provide, and they hopefully will spread the knowledge. One group member noted how his community has recognized the expertise that the university has to offer and that the community is eager for more engagement. Dana Manley suggested that universities work with public school teachers to increase exposure to the arts in classes as special projects.

The group also discussed cross-curricular possibilities, such as a strong connection between social work and financial planning, or financial planning and music students who want to create music studios. David Durr mentioned how some members of Boy Scouts took a financial planning lesson to help them earn a badge.

3. Share techniques, technologies or structures for providing prompt feedback to students

Quizzes

Mark Staynings, WKU, introduced an effective tool he has used to give and receive feedback in class to promote learning. He first lectures on a topic, then conducts an open-note quiz in class. As he

grades the students' quizzes, he attaches a key to help the students analyze the quiz and their results. He later conducts a second quiz at which time notes are not permitted. He sees a notable improvement in scores between the two quizzes. Finally, he gives an exam over the topic. The repeated feedback reinforces the material, and student grades reflect the effectiveness.

Mary Lemons, UT Martin, selects textbooks that have websites with quizzes so that students can take the quizzes and be provided prompt feedback on their comprehension of the material. Some textbooks also come with DVDs that have case studies acted out and prompt students with questions to answer and then provide explanations. These activities provide another way for students to receive prompt feedback either inside or outside of the class.

In-class Discussions

Mark Staynings also requires his students to review articles related to economics. The in-class discussions that follow encourage students to see the relationship between politics and economics and reinforce the concept of supply and demand.

Classroom Environments and Influences

Lemons noted that the number of students in a class influences the amount of feedback that is given to each student. She has also noticed that gender can influence student participation in classroom discussion and feedback.

The Humanities group also discussed their variety of classroom environments and how the environments affect the feedback process.

One-on-One

Amy Simmons, music faculty member at UT Martin, has only one-on-one sessions with music students demonstrating proficiency with their instruments (oboe/clarinet). Students must practice 10 hours/week on their own in a practice room where they record their playing to a laptop using *Audacity* software. Simmons noted, "Giving feedback is different in a large lecture setting than a smaller one; almost all I do is prompt feedback. I teach one-on-one. I use Audacity software to record as a different sort of feedback."

Amy Simmons would model correct technique during the individual sessions, demonstrating correct fingering positions, timing, and the reading of the music score. Since she has the same students for eight semesters, feedback at the end of one semester seems "prompt."

Workshops/Clinical Observation

Another music faculty member (Robyn Swanson, WKU) focuses on methodology/pedagogy for elementary and middle school teachers. Part of the training she provides involves a few minutes of lecturing before the students do group-modeling teaching practices. An aspect of this involves observing other teachers and writing observation reports—these are reflective assignments where students suggest refinements of skills.

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is currently focusing on student engagement, so this gives the students ownership in their education. They reflect on their own efforts at teaching as well as on their observations of teachers that they visit in the public school systems, after-school programs, and weekend programs. Robyn believes in the use of rubrics, and she distributes them to her students so that they will know what is expected of them. If she thinks a student has given an incorrect answer, she tries to reframe the answer in a positive way as she guides them toward the correct answer.

Sometimes, depending upon the engagement activity, the feedback can be directed toward the whole class, a group, or an individual. When students are processing the instructor's remarks, a class member's rewording often helps clarify what the instructor is saying.

"Reframing the situation lets me guide an incorrect answer to a correct one. I like to use Madeline Hunter's approach of questioning that leads to a direction."

—Robyn Swanson, WKU

At WKU, education classes perform pre- and post- testing as a model for what elementary and middle school teachers will be doing.

Standard Classroom

The English faculty member of the Humanities group (Marcie Johnson, MSU) teaches in the standard institutional format of the typical MWF/TR schedule of 35 students per class. Her classes vary from lecturing to writing to peer reviewing of writing.

Feedback begins from day one. The instructor wants students to understand that there is no single right answer when interpreting literature—as long as they can support it with evidence from the text. Johnson stated, "I teach 30-35 students in conventional classrooms. I feel that I have to find ways to signal to them to discuss how their day is challenging. Feedback in many cases needs to be immediate. Never have a first day when students don't do something. For example, we start studying 6th century contemporary attitudes through a 22nd century analyst's eyes. I have them go back in time and analyze attitudes."

"Asking more questions and challenging assumptions provides feedback. I don't really know how much they recognize the feedback. Sometimes feedback is in the way you say something after you have caught an error."

—Marcie Johnson, MSU

During the peer review process, the students can tell each other as readers what makes sense and what is working well. "If anything, the trouble is getting them to be more critical," says Marcie Johnson. It's important that they know they aren't writing just to a teacher. Johnson stated, "I have found that the first draft of an essay, through peer review, works well for providing feedback. Sometimes the students are too kind."

Sometimes the faculty member will ask the students to answer questions before they come to class. When they return, they meet in groups to discuss their answers to the analysis of a play, short story, or poem. In the group, someone can record the variety of responses, not necessarily the "right" answer.

"The world works through verbal sharing," so the English faculty member gets verbal responses by asking surface questions of the literature to verify that the text was read in order to assure that the students are prepared enough to carry on a more in-depth discussion. She often conducts a 3-5 point short writing assignment to verify that students have been attentive readers.

Use of Technology

Members of the Humanities group discussed how technology has had an impact on the way they provide feedback to students and the way they encourage feedback from their students. They stated that due to technology, students expect prompt feedback.

Paul Bush, WKU, mentioned the use of technology for feedback since he uses a feature in Blackboard that allows for anonymous postings. This gives the students opportunity to ask questions and make comments and still be shy. Marcie Johnson does the same thing and found that the most active time it is used is right before an exam. She tells the students, “If you wonder, you’re not alone. I guarantee.”

English as a Second Language (ESL) students from other countries understand the faculty during the lecture, except that the speed of speech is too fast sometimes. Another concern is that some students have thick accents that international students have difficulty understanding. Marcie Johnson explained, “I’ve never taught the same class because students change. The challenge for me this semester has been for students from Korea, language skills are very limited. They are attentive listeners and often don’t ask questions in class. I encourage them to ask questions in class, and small groups have helped.” With technology, such as discussion boards, though, the ability for students to interject ideas into the class is not hampered by the verbal/aural barrier.

There is a concern that technology has taken over too much. Do faculty give in and use the technology or “force [students] to look each other in the eye and talk to one another?” (Amy Simmons, UT Martin). There seems to be less conflict if the discussion is in writing on Blackboard. Susan Edington, MSU, stated, “Blackboard allows students to react/interact without being threatened.”

The music educator (Robyn Swanson) likes to use a discussion board when the students are critiquing journal articles—they post a review and then critique the reviews of their fellow students—to get different perspectives.

Ervin Briones, UT Martin, doesn’t assign much value to the quizzes on-line because of possible cheating. However, the educational value for immediate feedback is important—the instructor can give the answers as feedback within the quizzes. He feels the feedback is important since he made it through undergraduate school at a large school without receiving any feedback at all—he got A’s but he wanted to learn from the mistakes that he did make. In class, he covers the items that a majority of the students have missed, rather than discuss the entire test.

The Technology group also discussed what role technology had played in their teaching. Technologies discussed include: online course management systems, such as Blackboard; synchronous communication tools, such as Elluminate; and Tablet PCs. Limitations of technologies were also mentioned. In an online environment, testing is problematic. Some instructors conduct online tests in controlled environments only. Dana Manley, MSU, also mentioned that students need to practice giving oral presentations, and this is challenging in online classes.

Amy Simmons, music instructor at UT Martin, described how she uses recording software called Audacity to record her students’ lessons. Students can then listen to and analyze their performances. The group suggested ways that such software could be used to record students’ dialogue, then listen and respond on their performance or discussion.

The group mentioned that they have not pursued podcasting, but that they like the idea of students being able to listen to lectures.

The group concluded that if the technology works to support teaching and learning, then it could be used. However, instructors should not let technology get in the way.

4. Do you employ methods for students to provide feedback to you?

Anonymous Surveys

After an exam, Marcie Johnson, MSU, conducts an anonymous survey, including the following questions:

1. Did the test seem fair?
2. What's working well in the class, and what is not?
3. What suggestions do you have for making this a class in which you can feel more confident in participating?

One instructor gives a bonus question on a test, asking for positive or negative feedback about the class. He prefers to have this feedback before too late in the semester so that he can take corrective measures or continue to use methods that students find effective. The feedback is essentially provided anonymously, and the professor has received useful, honest feedback. David Durr, MSU, noted that he would prefer asking for anonymous feedback, and the Business group discussed how anonymous surveys can be enabled in course management systems, such as Blackboard. A professor would see whether a student completed the survey or not, but would not be able to track the responses back to an individual student.

Robyn Swanson, WKU, stated, "I like using blind reflection for students to anonymously respond—What do you think regarding structure? I find that these responses provide me tips to change and modify a class. As a teacher, I really have no idea what they are feeling."

Student Evaluations

In the Business group, the faculty discussed that students provide feedback to the instructors through student evaluations. Mary Lemons also described the exit interviews that students have with the college dean. Occasionally, the dean provides informal, positive feedback to the professor based on what is learned in the interviews.

Informal Conversations

The Business group members agreed that they most often receive feedback from students simply by talking with them. Especially if the student has had the instructor for more than one class, the relationship established allows for a more informal discussion and feedback opportunity. A professor may, for example, ask the students what they think about the textbook being used.

Clickers (Personal Response System)

Karen Mason's students loved the clickers (response system). For classrooms that do not have the technology, Marcie Johnson shared the sticky note technique of having students put the notes on A, B, C, D, E charts on the wall after their groups reached a consensus.

Quizzes

In the literature classes, both Marcie Johnson, MSU, and Paul Bush, WKU, provide quick, broad five-point questions (with a deeper extra bonus question) at the beginnings of each class to encourage the

students to read and to assess who is reading the text. For both of them, it is disappointing to see how many aren't reading the assigned material. Johnson offers students a chance to recoup the lost points by typing out a detailed paragraph-by-paragraph summary of the text covered by the quiz. Johnson pointed out that limiting the time for on-line quizzes is important if the purpose is to see how much the student has absorbed, although she has no objection if the students use the text if the purpose is to see if they can access the knowledge. Paul Bush added that his son's college chemistry instructor allows the students to take the on-line quizzes over and over as often as they'd like.

Mark Staynings' undergraduate history instructor promised students that they would have 14 pop quizzes during the course of the semester. Students either prepared or they paid for it. He now provides his students with "progressive feedback" by first conducting open-note quizzes and later conducting closed-note quizzes. Students and the instructor then see improvement, and the method gets the students' attention and leads to improved study.

5. How do you assess whether feedback mechanisms are adequate?

Clarifying Expectations with Students

David Durr, MSU, explains what the timelines of his feedback are likely to be to his students at the beginning of the semester. The students then know to expect him to take longer giving feedback on exams than giving feedback during in-class discussions, for example. Durr noted that you create an environment for your students, and you define expectations in part by your reputation. Students hear about a professor from other students. Durr also underscored the importance of being consistent with your expectations.

The whole school of agriculture in Pat Williams' department uses the same writing rubric in order to be sure the feedback is consistent. Other faculty members also described their use of rubrics to clarify and maintain a standard set of expectations that they had for their students.

Assessing Students' Abilities and Work Ethic

Faculty members expressed disappointment in the students' lack of proofreading skills and work ethic. One faculty member stated, regarding work ethic, "one already has it by the time he reaches college or he doesn't. It isn't something one learns when he or she is eighteen years old." Marcie Johnson disagreed, but the faculty member said, maybe, but it's difficult at this late age. "In fact, I had a student that I was advising last semester who said, 'I want classes without a lot of reading in them,' so I said, 'Then what are you doing here?'"

Johnson's reply is she doesn't feel singularly prepared to tell the students that they shouldn't be in college. "Often they are struggling with family expectations and a sense of responsibility that make me ache." The group discussed that sometimes students have the intellectual abilities, but not the work ethic. The K-12 experience has misled them into thinking they are doing well and then there is the shock of the college work load.

One of the faculty remarked, even with tutoring centers, the students will not take advantage of the offer for free help. Then they are in trouble because they cannot drop a class because it will interfere with their financial aid. The question was raised—how do we convince them to cut their other commitments or cut their hours? Magazines tell us that we have a high school graduation rate of 56 percent, but that means that the failure rate is 44 percent. Do we sacrifice the education of those students who want to be in our classes for those who aren't ready or don't want to be there? Even some valedictorians receive academic probation. Johnson noted, "They just haven't been

challenged—they got through high school without working. So, how do we give feedback to those students?” Pat Williams replied, “They have to want to be [challenged] or I tell them, ‘You’re wasting your time and you’re wasting my time.’”

Constraints of Using Peer Review

Although peer review is used to provide prompt feedback, faculty did identify a trust issue with using peer review. Paul Bush, WKU, shared his students’ distrust of their neighbors’ abilities to make valid comments about their writing. Marcie Johnson, MSU, therefore uses a projector to show pre-submitted drafts which have identifying marks stripped away on screen in order to focus on aspects of the student’s writing—without actually grading it. The trouble is that in a content course, this takes away from the literature or the psychology. Briones agrees wholeheartedly. It compromises the learning due to time constraints.

Receiving Feedback from Students

Mary Lemons, UT Martin, suggested that one way of assessing feedback mechanisms is to see if students take future courses under the same professor. She also discussed how grade distribution may be a measurable outcome based on objectives defined at the beginning. To help students know what a “good” project is, and thereby understanding what the instructor’s expectations are, Mary suggested providing students with samples to review. It is also important to define course goals and objectives for the students.

Lemons gives constructive criticism to students in private. She is willing to challenge students and sees that it makes a positive impact. Students have come back to thank her and credit her for making a difference in their lives.

One instructor has been told by a student that he isn’t tough...he’s thorough. The student went on to say that if they study, they will learn the material and succeed in class.

Mark Staynings has served as department head. During that time, he received feedback from students about professors.

David Durr mentioned that students are using websites such as RateMyProfessor.com to provide feedback about professors. Their comments are likely biased based on their experiences, but it is a mechanism of feedback. Word-of-mouth is also used for students to provide recommendations, yet these are also based on self-experiences.

Acknowledgments

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Other Recognitions:

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Edited by Beth Sloan, Murray State University

Appendix A: Journals Resource List (organized by discipline)

Agriculture

North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA) Journal

Business

Financial Practice and Education
Journal of Financial and Economic Practice
Journal of Management Education
The American Economic Review
The Journal of Marketing Education
The Southern Economic Association Journal

Chemistry

American Biotechnology Laboratory
Analytical Chemistry
Chemical & Engineering News
Environmental Chemistry
Journal of Chemical Education

Education

Current Issues in Education
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Educational Research
Phi Delta Kappan
Teacher Education Quarterly
Teachers College Record

English

College English
College Literature
English Language Notes
PMLA

Engineering

Advances in Engineering Education (online)
International Journal of Electrical Engineering Education
Journal of College Science Teaching
Journal of Engineering Education

Family & Consumer Science

Behavior Journal of the American Dietetic Association
Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal
Journal of Nutrition Education

Music

General Music Today
Journal of Music Teacher Education
Journal of Research Music Education Update (MENC)
Teaching Music
The Journal of Research in Music Education
The Music Educators Journal

Nursing

American Journal of Nursing
Journal of Nursing Education
Nurse Educator
Nurse Science Quarterly
Nursing Research
Psychiatric Nursing

Psychology

Psychology: Learning & Teaching
Teaching of Psychology