

Designing Effective Feedback Processes in Higher Education: A Learning-Focused Approach

Society for Research into Higher Education Series

Naomi Winstone and David Carless

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Academic progress rises and falls on both how an instructor provides feedback and how a student receives feedback. In this volume, Naomi Winstone and David Carless, two leading international scholars in the area of academic feedback (Winstone in the UK and Carless in Hong Kong), join forces to streamline their various strands of research into one unified, “learning-centered” approach to designing systems that articulate effective feedback in higher education. Published jointly by Routledge and the UK-based Society for Research into Higher Education, this volume pulls together a massive amount of research conducted through the “Feedback Cultures in Higher Education” project, a year-long project that examined “the proximal and distal influences on the common ways in which feedback processes are enacted in contemporary higher education” (1-2). The project focused on three “strands” related to feedback: the practice of feedback, the cultures that influence feedback, and the process of developing a new set of best practices for improving feedback.

As instructors who love our subjects—especially those of us who teach practical matters (for example, this reviewer teaches preaching and practical theology)—we want our students to love it as much as we do and practice what we teach as competently as we practice it. When it comes to feedback, however, there are two significant problems that prevent the feedback process from being successful—how the instructor gives feedback and how the student processes it. Offered poorly, it can come across as harsh or even cruel rather than insightful or corrective. Taken poorly, it can lead to dismissive or withdrawn behavior. Either way, the learning process has been short-circuited. The good news, according to the authors, is that both instructors and students can learn “feedback literacy” (25).

According to the authors, feedback literacy is like any other form of literacy (such as digital, cultural, emotional, or critical). In short, it is a learning tool that is socialized by the student’s learning environment. This connects to the instructor because, anecdotally speaking, instructors teach as they were taught. Unless instructors have intentionally facilitated change in their pedagogy, they will naturally teach as they were taught. Thus, both the student *and* the instructor must learn the language of feedback, with the instructor setting the tone as learner in order to facilitate a healthy environment for effective feedback. This process of developing literacy in feedback involves three practices, according to the authors: learning to appreciate the purpose and process for feedback, learning to harness the emotional impact, and learning to take action in feedback.

This volume arrived in the mail at just the right moment. I was developing a professional workshop on evaluating sermons in an online homiletics course for practical theology professors who found themselves now teaching online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was able to integrate some of the basic concepts from this volume into that lecture to help these colleagues visualize the possibility of providing effective feedback in a pedagogical environment that they were not accustomed to. Additionally, as one who values peer-to-peer feedback, this volume provides both a framework for visualizing what a healthy culture of feedback can look like and a process for articulating constructive and healthy feedback.