How can I give students useful feedback—and still get my own work done?

Most instructors know that effective feedback is essential to helping students learn from assessments, but sometimes they aren't sure what kind of feedback works best. Read the case below and see what you think of the different strategies these TA's describe.

> *Mario and Olivia are teaching Foundations of Education this semester. Both of them decided that instead of just using tests to assess students' learning, they would assign three 1-page assignments during the semester. They have just received their first batch of short papers and are discussing their plans for grading and giving students feedback. As they talk, they realize that they have very different ideas about how they should go about responding to their students' work.*

> *Olivia says: "From just glancing through what I've received, I can see so many errors that need correcting! I think I'm going to need to spend a lot of time giving students detailed feedback so that they know where all their mistakes are. This will help me ensure that the next set of papers is much better."*

> *Mario says: "That sounds great, but I just don't think I have time to do that. I have papers of my own to write! I heard from a friend in another program that they set limits for how long they will spend giving feedback on each paper and just look for the issues that are most problematic. I think that approach is more manageable and will give students enough feedback to improve their work."*

Take a moment to write down some ideas about what you just read. What is the difference between these two approaches to giving feedback? Which instructor's feedback strategy do you think is most likely to help their students?

The relationship between feedback and learning

If we analyze these two approaches, we see some commonly held beliefs about the purpose of feedback. Olivia believes that her job is to mark all her students' errors so they know all the areas where they need to improve. Instructors who take this approach tend to believe that students can only learn if they get detailed feedback on every error or weakness in their work. This approach to grading takes a tremendous amount of time but often makes instructors feel confident that they are giving students the tools they need to be successful. Mario, on the other hand, realizes that he simply doesn't have the time to respond to students' work in such detail and believes that students can learn from receiving feedback on only a few areas of concern. Instructors who take this approach tend to believe that students can use smaller amounts of feedback to improve their work. This approach to grading can help instructors save time and energy but sometimes makes instructors worry that they aren't doing enough to help their students.

While Olivia's approach will provide her students with a great deal of feedback, the research tells us that Mario's approach, if thoughtfully implemented, is actually more likely to benefit students. Why is this seemingly minimalist approach more likely to be helpful? The research tells us that receiving too much feedback at once does not help students improve—in fact, it may confuse them. Students become easily overwhelmed by too many comments and have difficulty

categorizing and prioritizing them, especially when those comments point to several different kinds of issues. Students can only attend to so much feedback on any given assignment, and when we point out problems with the content of their ideas, use of evidence, sentence style, punctuation, and citation style—all on the same assignment—they struggle to filter through all that feedback in a helpful way (Stern & Solomon, 2006; Underwood & Tregidgo, 2005). When we give students feedback that points in too many directions, they simply cannot process and make use of it all.

Strategies for giving effective feedback

Now that we've considered some principles to help us think about the role of feedback in learning, let's consider some strategies you can use to help you give effective feedback (and save time!).

Start by identifying what matters most.
The process of giving students feedback on their work begins before you sit down to grade a batch of assignments or tests. It's important to start by making sure you clearly understand the purpose of the assessment. If you are designing your own assignments or tests, make sure you are thinking carefully about why you are asking students to do the work of the assessment and what's most important in that work. If you are a Teaching Assistant and grading assessments that others have designed, take time to analyze the assessment carefully and make sure you understand its purpose and what is most important for students to demonstrate in their work. This may require you to ask the professor some questions about the assignment, but having a clear understanding up front will save time when you are grading! Once you know what is most important in the assessment, you have a strategy for reading students' work and focusing your feedback.

Before you write any comments, analyze the work as a whole so that you can decide where to focus your feedback.
When you begin marking or commenting on students' work as soon as you begin reading it, you can easily fall into the role of editor—marking every error, underlining every point of confusion, and pointing out every poorly rendered phrase. Instead of providing focused commentary to guide their development, you find yourself simply commenting on every problem or error you notice. A better approach for giving focused feedback is to start by reading through a student's entire work so that you can get a big-picture view of the work and identify the most important areas of concern. Don't make any marks or comments but instead use this first read to assess the work overall and identify the areas of concern (no more than 2 or 3!) where you will focus your feedback—and students' attention. Initially it may seem that this approach will take longer, and you *will* have to invest some time to learn how to assess and respond to students' work in these new ways. But in the long run, this analytical strategy will actually save you time: when you start with a broad assessment of students' work as a first step, you will find yourself less tempted to comment on every minor error you see. Most importantly, it means that you give less feedback but students can do more with it because you are focusing your attention on what they need and can work with.

Limit the time you spend on each student's work so you can focus your feedback.
One of the best ways to ensure that you keep your focus is to spend a set amount of time on each student's assignment or test. This simple strategy can help ensure that you don't get bogged down in making too many corrections or comments, and it also helps you manage your time so that you don't get too overwhelmed with trying to mark every error you see. To help gauge the amount of time you need for each paper, test out the strategy with two pieces of student work: conduct an overall assessment and then comment on only the most important areas of concern. Keep track of the time you spend on those two pieces, and use that to help you determine how long you will use to respond to the remaining assignments. So, for example, if it takes you 12 minutes to respond to the first assessment and 15 minutes to respond to the second one, that suggests that you might need to allot about 15 minutes for each assessment. Set a timer and make yourself adhere to the time limit so that you don't start giving students too much feedback that will overwhelm and confuse them.

Create a plan for giving feedback that helps you manage your time and energy.
While it may seem counterintuitive, the research-informed recommendations above suggest that more time spent on giving students feedback will not necessarily lead to better outcomes. This realization is powerful because it puts you in control of your grading time: if you know that you are going to spend roughly the same amount of time giving focused feedback on every assessment, you can anticipate how much time you need to spend on a set of papers or tests. When you can plan in this way, you can protect the time and energy you need for your own work—and still help your students. Grading plans might take different forms depending on your circumstances, but one of the most important principles for planning is to distribute the work of grading and giving feedback over time. For example, if you are grading longer assessments (like papers or lengthy exams), try to respond to a few (no more than 6 or 7) papers each day. While it can be tempting to set aside a day and tackle a large batch of assignments, you'll find it harder to focus as the day progresses. If you are grading shorter pieces or have to grade many assignments in a single day, be sure to give yourself frequent breaks so that you don't get too overwhelmed. Set your timer to grade 3 or 4 assessments, and then take a 15-minute break. When you sit down for the next small batch, you'll find yourself better able to focus.

Resources about effective feedback

Stern, L.A. & Solomon, A. (2006). Effective faculty feedback: The road less traveled. *Assessing Writing, 11,* 22-41.

Underwood, J.S. & Tregidgo, A.P. (2005). Improving student writing through effective feedback: Best practices and recommendations. *Journal of Teaching Writing, 22*(2), 73-97.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.J. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

If you'd like to learn more about spending less time to give more effective feedback on students' work, please feel free to request a consultation with ITLAL.