Online Grading & Feedback:
Empowerment, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

By Barbara Angeline

[Excerpt from *Pedagogy for Online Dance Education*, MFA Dance curriculum, Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. B Angeline, Course Author. Copyright 2010]

Equitable assessment of student work in online assignments brings its own set of considerations beyond the actual assessment of course goal achievement. Skills of all sorts must be slowly built into online assignments, and it can be difficult to "see" each student to determine where that student is "at" when entering an assignment and how best to guide that student to end of the semester learning objective achievement. This is not so much differentiating instruction as it is driving <u>all</u> students to further potential, managing frustration and confusion for struggling students and making sure that even the "smartest" student has feedback to improve work. "Smartest" is in quotes because the work done by a student in one course, which has many levels of complex skills needed, should not be translated as a representation of that student's intelligence. Just as you and I have small and large areas of expertise, and small and large areas of non-expertise, we should always keep in mind that our students are a complex intertwining of body, mind and spirit.

Student ability to communicate learning:

Rutgers has many international students as well as US students from many backgrounds. Scholarly thinking and articulation of that thinking for an "English as a second language (ESL)" student can be truly challenging and incredibly frustrating for a student who is a deep, critical thinker and is able to express well in the original language. When grading, we do have to grade grammar, etc. for proper English to forward strong writing. However, for student ideas and thinking, you sometimes need to be a good "detective" and suss out what might be very critically connected ideas with poor language translation. When it is obvious that a student really needs language support (and this is for English as 1st language students, too!) you can include support sites and university resources for writing help at the bottom of the feedback:

Example:

Moving forward, you will want to give some attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Proofreading carefully will make a big difference, and if you want extra writing help, here is a link that you can go to: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ In addition, the Plangere Tutoring Center is run by the Writing Center in the English Department at Rutgers. They provide writing tutoring for all registered students who need support for a writing assignment. Tutoring is not restricted to English courses. Here's the website, which lists hours of operation: http://wp.rutgers.edu/tutoring/455-plangerewc

Length and tone:
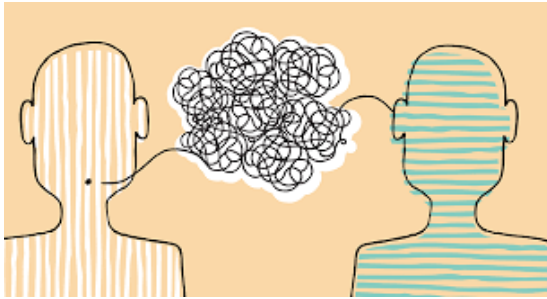
Engaging and interacting with students in an online environment is essential to the student's experiences as a learner and as a human in the course. Remember that students aren't seeing your smiling face for 1-3 hours in class before tackling homework. And you can't see their excitement or frowns. So written feedback or gradebook comments carry quite a bit of weight for the student, since this may be the only time each week that the two of you connect. Your feedback, however short, forwards your personal interaction with the student. Feedback should be encouraging. For you, a balance between giving individual feedback and spending hours of time in front of the computer grading will have to be navigated. But you should keep in mind that the hours of class prep and lectures are off your plate and folded into the expectations of time allotted for the class. Not every assignment necessitates lengthy feedback, but if there is guidance you can give that will help the student, then it should be given. In addition, any part of the assignment that received a low point determination should be explained.

Language:

Written feedback and communication emplace an additional need for careful consideration of the language we use to address students. Notice in the grammar feedback above, there is careful wording to make it clear to the student that support—in this case writing help—is

available and optional—not help for the <u>student</u>, but help for the student's <u>writing</u>. This is a subtle difference in language, but an important one. We are grading and addressing the student's specific work on that specific assignment, not grading the student or the student's general abilities. This distinction is important for the reinforcement of strong work and suggestions for further improvement.

Guiding students towards skill building and achievement of learning objectives:

Every student should have feedback that offers guidance towards improved work. Building skills and achieving the parts of course learning that will eventually lead to exceptional achievement of learning objectives should be prioritized. These skills and objectives are different from achieving exceptional completion of the individual assignment. In other words, feedback that details all missing or less-than-exceptionally-addressed elements of one particular assignment may not be helpful to the student's overall learning. For example, vivid descriptions of dance and deep, critical connections in analysis may be more important than if the student mislabels or misinterprets a part of a specific dance. Skills and objective achievement that are strongly evidenced in student work should be reinforced, so that the student knows which work is on track. If a student's work is very strong, see if you can still find ways of guiding the student to greatness. We need dance advocates in all areas of life, so forwarding the work of all students is essential. As stated before—and worth keeping as a rhythm in your work—"The student is a whole human. Whole human. Whole human." You may have the next President in your class, with imperfect dance "language" or experience. Reel in that potential dance aficionado!

Discrimination:

Grading and language for feedback and student communication also need to be non-discriminatory. Here is Rutgers' policy on discrimination:

> **Discrimination** is defined as an ==intentional or unintentional== act which adversely affects employment or educational opportunities on the basis of membership in one or more protected classes. Rutgers provides equal employment opportunity to all its employees and applicants for employment regardless of their ==race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, age, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy, gender identity and expression, disability, genetic information, atypical hereditary cellular or blood trait, marital status, civil union status, domestic partnership status, military service, veteran status, and any other category protected by law.== Rutgers considers as a basis for selection in employment only those characteristics which are demonstrably related to job performance or requirements.

Retrieved from: http://policies.rutgers.edu/sites/policies/files/00004529.PDF

[Highlights/emphasis added by instructor.]

What does this mean for online pedagogy?

o **Grading –** This may seem obvious, but it's worth stating: Regardless of how any of the elements listed in the highlighted section above impacts the student's work, every student's work must be graded with the assignment rubric, with equity in interpreting how student work translates to points. Critical thinking, course content knowledge and strong connections are expected of ALL students. You may not discriminate against or FOR a student. There are support systems in place at Rutgers that include emotional

help, scholarly help and accommodations for those students that need them. You can grade consistently across all students and gently offer services if you sense that they may be needed.

o **Language –** Perhaps less obvious is language that unintentionally discriminates. For example, unless a student specifically expresses a gender identity and a desire to be addressed as such, language should always be gender neutral. The easiest way to do this is to use the student's name. Not only does this practice ensure that a student is not unintentionally diminished, it also forwards our position as leaders in the continued work of inclusivity, and it sets an example for students to follow.

Tips for Effective and Protective Digital Communication

Communication via email is VERY different from classroom modes of communicating. Your ability to navigate written communication is extremely important, since both you and the student have <u>documentation</u> of every interaction. Begin now to use these essential email practices:

a. Protect yourself and your department: Joking and off-hand remarks do not "read" well and can come back to haunt you. Be careful, too, about "sounding" more lenient than you and your course policies will allow.
b. Writing should be warm and professional. Overly friendly or overly personal emails can be misinterpreted. Less is more. State what is needed.
c. Know when to ask for help if a student needs something that you can't or don't know how to provide. This includes course related and medical/emotional issues. Refer a student in need to the proper services.
d. Proofread your email before sending. Is there anything that could be misinterpreted by a confused/needy/angry student? If the Chair or Dean read the email "chain", would anything come in to question?