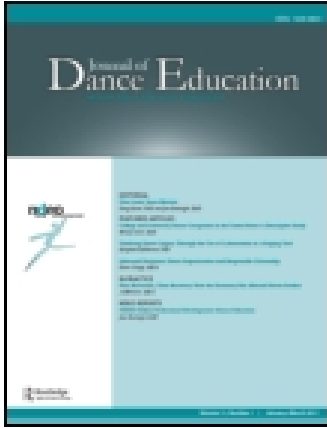


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Hold on to This!: Strategies for Teacher Feedback in Online Dance Courses

Doug Risner PhD, MFA^a

^a Maggie Allesee Department of Theatre & Dance, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

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Hold on to This!

Strategies for Teacher Feedback in Online Dance Courses

Doug Risner, PhD, MFA

Maggie Allesee Department of
Theatre & Dance, Wayne State
University, Detroit, MI

ABSTRACT Drawn from current research on web-based learning, this practical article presents applied research and informed applications for online dance educators engaged in undergraduate and graduate dance education course work. With a focus on written assessment feedback, the author provides a review of recent literature, an overview of written feedback types and characteristics, and examples and writing approaches for effective and supportive qualitative feedback. Challenges and unresolved concerns are explored. Given the dearth of published research specifically in online dance education, the article concludes with a series of recommendations and strategies for readers' consideration.

As postsecondary dance departments continue their migration of current courses to web-based formats and design new online course work and programs, questions about integrity, rigor, and student learning outcomes remain (McFarlane 2011). Compton, Davis, and Correia (2010) contend that the most crucial pedagogical concerns for online educators are rigor, interaction, and teacher feedback. Although I have little doubt that online courses in dance can be as rigorous as traditional face-to-face courses (Moore 2012), I have had concerns about providing effective and meaningful instructor feedback to students, primarily because the online environment brings up a number of communication challenges not confronted in the traditional classroom. In the following I share what I have learned in developing formative and summative assessments for web-based learners and provide feedback examples and writing strategies for online dance educators. A central thread of this article, which I refer to as a “hold on to this!” approach, focuses on teacher feedback that affirms the student’s current learning and then encourages additional thinking and further development of the student’s ideas.

BACKGROUND

When we think about students in online dance courses, we are actually talking about asynchronous learners, which Mayadas (1997) defines as “an interactive learning community that is not limited by time, space or the constraints of a classroom” (2). Research has shown that asynchronous learning environments facilitate student learning (Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz 1999), and that asynchronous communication fosters critical thinking and “in-depth learning because students have more time to process information and develop their thinking” (Huang and Hsiao 2012, 15). At the same time, research has indicated that delayed teacher communication and untimely feedback for asynchronous learners are primary limitations and could produce feelings of detachment and separation from the instructor (Branon and Essex 2001). Qualitative feedback is widely acknowledged as a critical element of online assessment (Gaytan and McEwen 2007) and student motivation and engagement (Young 2006). Researchers

Address correspondence to Doug
Risner, PhD, MFA, Professor of Dance,
Maggie Allesee Department of
Theatre & Dance, Wayne State
University, 4841 Cass Avenue, Detroit,
MI 48202. E-mail: drisner@wayne.edu

have reported that descriptive and detailed feedback, especially when specific to the individual student's work, is most effective (Lipnevich and Smith 2006); encouragement and praise also figured prominently "in students' perceptions of the benefit of feedback" (Earl 2013, 164). Other researchers have focused on the significance of supportive, constructive, meaningful, and nonthreatening feedback for online learners (Hummel 2006; McFarlane 2011). This brief review of the pertinent literature summarizes much of what I have learned in my online teaching practice.

ASSIGNMENTS, LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND FEEDBACK

The assignments and tasks that educators devise for online courses are tied directly to the kind of learning experiences they hope will develop new student knowledge, which educators have identified as important and worth knowing. At the same time, these assignments and desired learning outcomes also determine the nature of the feedback educators provide to students. Although this seems straightforward and sounds simple, over time I have found that the online environment requires closer attention to the voice, tone, purpose, and scope of feedback I provide, as well as the role(s) I play when writing and presenting students with effective and meaningful feedback. Although online courses often employ multiple and varied forms of assessment feedback, including exams, quizzes, peer feedback (Christopher, Thomas, and Tallent-Runnels 2004), ungraded student self-tests (Robles and Braathen 2002), and synchronous feedback communication (Gaytan and McEwen 2007), my focus here is teacher assessment feedback in written form.

For this article, I use examples from two online courses I created using a nine-module design¹ and currently teach: Foundations of Dance Pedagogy (upper undergraduate level) and Issues in Dance Curriculum Planning (graduate level in a fully online program). Because both courses are reading and writing intensive, their content and form provide a number of challenges for giving timely and effective instructor feedback to students. As upper division courses for dance majors and graduate students, enrollment normally varies from 10 to 18 students in each course. For readers who teach web-based studio courses (e.g., choreography, composition, directed study) or experiential classes (e.g., internship, apprenticeship, field work, and student teaching supervision), some examples and strategies for feedback might be more relevant than others.

¹Both courses contain nine sequential modules delivered over a 15-week semester through Blackboard Learn+ 9.1. Modules vary in length from one to three weeks. Formative assessment feedback is provided to students for modules longer than one week in duration. Students post all of their written assignments and tasks to Blackboard discussion boards created by the instructor for each module; separate boards are also created (Class Lounge, Course Questions, Reflections, Big Ideas Bucket).

Feedback for Formal Writing Assignments

A significant portion of formal writing in both sample courses occurs in a summary paper–position paper format I designed a number of years ago (Risner 2010). During the first half of the semester, students write summary papers: two-page (12-point font, double-spaced, 600 words maximum) summary of the article assigned, which students post to the discussion board. Objectives of the summary paper include the following:

- To develop students' reading and comprehension skills.
- To develop students' ability to articulate in succinct ways an author's primary arguments and rationale.
- To prepare students for informed and engaged discussion of the assigned readings.
- To prepare students for writing articulate and informed position papers later in the semester.

The summary paper should explain the focus of the article and give a concise summary of three to four major points articulated by the author; it is not an opinion or response paper.

Later in the term, we transition to writing position papers. Although the two-page format requirements remain the same, the position paper content allows students to make informed and articulate responses to the reading based on their learning to date in the course and to craft their own arguments that are carefully thought through, well-reasoned, and clearly expressed. An effective position paper includes the following characteristics:

- It summarizes the author's primary ideas, arguments, and rationale for such.
- It responds to the author's arguments in informed ways.
- It asks critical questions about the ideas, problems, and solutions offered by the author.
- Examples, if given, extend beyond the student's own experiences and environment.
- It concludes with a well-reasoned position.

The summary paper–position paper format addresses both teacher and student needs in assessment feedback, as Earl (2013) notes:

Short-text formats, restricting the word count of assignments to 800 words or less, increase the expectations of students to identify key knowledge and concepts, evaluate and synthesise learning and material, and to be articulate. Short-text assignments emphasise quality rather than quantity and provide teachers with succinct evidence of students' depth of thinking. The use of short-text formats for assignments can maintain the important teacher–student interaction around assessment. (164)

Given the nature of these paper assignments, the formal writing feedback I provide for students emerges from my role as "specialist facilitator" (see Table 1). The feedback scope is detailed and thorough, accompanied by additional

TABLE 1 Web-Based Teacher Feedback Types and Characteristics

Assignment or Task	Feedback Purpose	Teacher Role	Feedback Scope and Tone
Formal writing assignments	Affirm student reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking skills. Clearly identify areas and skills to be developed with examples and questions.	Specialist facilitator	Scope: detailed and thorough Tone: encouraging and probing; critical yet helpful; highlighting the student's growth and potential
Task-based writing assignments	Acknowledge and confirm degree of student understanding of task content and quality of responses. Stimulate and support additional thinking.	Task guide and inquisitor	Scope: descriptive and concise Tone: guiding and questioning; highlighting the student's thinking by using his or her own words and ideas
Reflective writing assignments	Recognize and affirm student insights and reflections. Encourage and promote deep thinking, self-directed learning, and ongoing inventory of values and beliefs.	Co-reflective practitioner	Scope: formative and contemplative Tone: collegial and invested; highlighting the student's discoveries and unresolved questions and concerns
Archival-assemblage tasks	Support students' identification and collection of important and meaningful work of their own, or of others.	Supportive observer	Scope: monitored and limited Tone: motivational and observant; highlighting benefits of tracking important resources
Postmodule announcements	Acknowledge student work completed, summarize class progress, and introduce new module.	Reporter and guide	Scope: summative and concise Tone: enthusiastic and affirmative; highlighting collective student progress and achievement
Student e-mail communication	Confirm receipt quickly and send reply as soon as feasible. Provide pertinent information and ask if questions remain.	Various	Scope: informative and effective Tone: supportive and cognizant; highlighting receptivity and the desire to clarify

comments and corrections entered directly in tracked changes to their original paper. I strive to highlight the student's growth within the module, whenever possible, and the student's potential for the next module. A sample portion of summary paper feedback² to an undergraduate pedagogy student³ whose initial writing skills and reading comprehension trailed well behind expectations for the course illustrates my approach:

Monique, your passion for the subject matter of Gray's 'Separated Desks' reading is clear and the personal stories you shared are very much appreciated, thank you. Your thoughtful discussion board comments to your peers were helpful and supportive. However for this assignment, what you've posted is not a summary paper. (I've emailed my comments and corrections in track changes to you.) Please reread the Summary Paper description guidelines document, because we want to make sure that you understand the aims of the summary paper and how to approach them. Once you've reviewed the guidelines, then

think about the first paragraph of your summary paper as introducing the reading itself and then state the author's three or four most important points in the reading. In this sense, your first paragraph will (1) contextualize the reading and (2) describe exactly what you're going to tell your readers for the rest of the paper. Use the three to four major points in the first paragraph to structure the remainder of your paper. Also (per the syllabus), remember that we're using Standard English grammar and punctuation for all assignments in this course. Our formal writing assignments in this course aren't blogs or text messages. Please feel free to send me a draft of your next summary paper before you submit it. I'm happy to give feedback. Use your passion for the topic to drive your commitment to writing an organized and articulate summary paper—hold on to this energy, you're completely capable of doing this. Email me if you have questions.

Feedback for Task-Based Writing Assignments

Another series of writing assignments included for both the dance pedagogy and curriculum planning courses is based on task-related assignments and experiences. Various tasks include viewing a video or film, viewing a narrated

²The assigned reading for this summary paper was Gray's (2006) "Culture of Separated Desks."

³Pseudonyms for students are used throughout this article.

PowerPoint or video cast, recollecting an experience or particular situation, articulating personal and professional values, and describing required experiential projects (Weeks 2010) and field observations. The most recent web-based instructional research indicates that:

The modularisation of assignments also allows for a variety of assignment formats designed to stimulate student interest and give the opportunity for individuals to demonstrate different strengths. Assignments were designed to encourage students to integrate their personal knowledge as well as to seek additional sources and resources. (Earl 2013, 166)

Due to the variety of task-based writing assignments in the courses, my feedback seeks to generally acknowledge and confirm the student's understanding of the task content itself, and to specifically assess the quality of the student's responses. To stimulate and support additional thinking, my role is one of task guide and inquisitor, emphasizing each student's thinking development by using his or her own words and ideas. What follows is an example of this type of feedback:⁴

Olivia: Such thoughtful and rigorous responses to Warburton's article (Beyond Steps) and the accompanying video cast! Whether it was the article, the video cast's content, the worksheet quotation format, or a combination of all, it appears that this assignment strongly resonated with you personally, your experiences, and questions. You identified a number of important insights throughout your assignment. The following comments stand out for me most: From #1, you said: 'Pedagogical knowledge is the glue that connects the teacher's content knowledge with the curriculum and creates meaningful relationships and connections in the learning process.' We will explore connected teaching further in the next module, which I think you'll enjoy. From #2, you said: 'Part of that delivery method involves knowing my students. I need to know on any given day their strengths and weaknesses, what they know and don't know, if they are happy, sad, excited, tired, or hungry.' We know in our bodies and minds, hearts and heads that engaged students are the ones who really learn and we want to work toward this approach. And from #3, you said: 'I would actually begin the cycle with assessment. Know the final destination before you start the trip.' Yes, which ties back to your previous comments and will be important for our Curriculum Plan project. Hold on to this for more thinking and curriculum theorizing this semester.

From module to module, feedback of this type aims to build meaningful teacher-student dialogue. Caldwell and Milling-Robbins (2007) assert that written discussion and feedback "happen over an extended period of time throughout the semester from an initial probing question. Students

and instructor can return to address ideas from earlier to see how their thoughts have altered" (26).

Feedback for Reflective Writing Assignments

Reflection is a critical methodology for both courses. Undergraduates contemplate two primary questions throughout the pedagogy course: What kind of teacher do I want to be? What does it mean to be responsible for someone else's learning? In the curriculum planning course, graduate students contemplate and reflect on two central questions: What is my personal philosophy of dance education? What's worth knowing, and why? Each course module includes at least one reflective writing assignment, and some include as many as three. A separate discussion board is created for posting these assignments (e.g., Pedagogy Reflections, Curriculum Reflections), which provides easy access for peer feedback and serves as an archive for the individual student.

Based on this reflective practice model, my feedback as a co-reflective practitioner is meant to recognize and affirm students' insights, ruminations, and lingering questions. As the instructor, my feedback seeks to encourage and promote deep thinking, self-directed learning, and ongoing inventory of students' values and beliefs. Because reflection is a continuous process throughout the courses, the feedback is formative and contemplative, focusing on the notion that much of personal empowerment comes from challenging our assumptions rather than ignoring them or accepting them without critique. A sample reflective writing assignment and my feedback comments demonstrate this approach. First, this is the assignment given:

DESCRIPTION: Our ongoing Values Inventory installments in this course are reflective writings about values and beliefs—what we think is important and why, as of now. These will not be graded but I will respond to them. It's likely that some of your ideas will not be woven together into a beautiful whole. These are starting places for your work this semester, not a permanent ending place. Use the writing as a process to think about what matters most to you as a dance educator, an emerging curriculum theorist, and as a person.

REFLECTION: Complete each of the following statements below. Describe briefly (no more than two sentences), and then ask yourself where you think they came from (a course? a school? a mentor? a teacher? an experience?). Elaborate and describe in more detail:

I wouldn't want to be a dance educator if it meant . . .

I wouldn't want to be a dance educator if I had to . . .

I wouldn't want to be a dance educator if I couldn't . . .

POST: Post your Values Inventory #1 assignment to the Curriculum Reflection Discussion Board.

⁴The assigned reading for this writing assignment was Warburton's (2008) "Beyond Steps: The Need for Pedagogical Knowledge in Dance."

Here are the instructor's comments:

Elise: I enjoyed reading your first set of value statements and the grounding from which they emerge and hold your continued attention—these are very important. I appreciated your honest responses and genuine questions (p. 2, bottom: ‘What do I do when others don’t have the same value system I have?’). Reflecting and writing these on a regular basis will provide you with greater clarity and support for your curriculum project later this semester. To step back a bit for a minute, the importance of identifying our values is much bigger than just the curriculum project for this course. As you noted, we live in a world that’s filled with extraneous noise, myriad distractions, and we’re saturated by a mediated culture that focuses on superficiality. For dance educators, we also live in a world filled with numerous administrative types and authority figures who are more than happy to tell us exactly what to do. Unfortunately, if we don’t have a real sense of our own commitments and values, we often do what others say without question or pause.

Therefore, the Values Inventory installments are meant to help us carefully develop a ‘support shield’ of sorts, that we can repeatedly call upon and use to deflect values that are not our own, and instead to be able to articulate in intelligent ways what’s most important about dance education curriculum. These are starting points; themes will increasingly become more apparent to you (don’t worry about that now, though!). For this first installment, let’s focus on your question about ‘other people’s values.’ First, it’s probably helpful for us to consider the likelihood that not everyone is going to hold similar values and commitments as ours. Maybe think about important people in your life who you care about deeply, but they don’t have the same value system you do: How do you negotiate relationships with them? Second, on a very basic level, values are a little bit like personal preferences (I like vanilla ice cream; let’s say you like chocolate). I wouldn’t expect you to eat vanilla, but we could still go to the local ice cream parlor together. Though this analogy is overly simplistic, it helps us understand that other people’s values don’t diminish what we hold deeply and intensely, but it does mean that we need to acknowledge that our values may not be the only well-intentioned values operating out there in education and in our schools. That said, our Values Inventory work will prepare you for intelligently articulating your perspectives and creating meaningful curriculum. I look forward to reading your next installment.

When possible, using inclusive pronouns, such words as *we* and *our*, and including a bit of humor can lessen the psychological distance online learners sometime experience (Baillie 2012, 4). In web-based environments, Sims (2013) notes that engaged student–teacher interaction allows “teachers [to] learn more about themselves as teachers and students to know themselves better as learners” (138). Reflective assessment and feedback that engages students affords them opportunities to direct their own learning, as well as their “knowledge application activities and strategies that foster engaged discovery” (Revere and Kovach 2011, 114).

Additional Written Feedback Opportunities

For online dance educators, the process of assessment and feedback is as much about how we virtually interact and develop relationships with our students⁵ as it is the way we measure student learning. Although not tied directly to individual assignments, three additional, informal feedback opportunities for building supportive relationships and providing ongoing feedback are student archival tasks,⁶ instructor postmodule announcements, and e-mail responses to student questions (see Table 1). Gaytan and McEwen (2007) indicate that, “The assessment value of e-mail messages, chat room conversations, and discussion board postings should not be ignored as they provide opportunities for the instructor to learn whether the students understand the instruction and are correctly interpreting the assessments” (129). Although these opportunities, taken separately, require considerably less instructor time and energy than other forms of feedback described earlier, each format contributes to overall teacher–student interaction and a supportive web-based course environment.

SUMMARY AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Effective online feedback in written form is timely and meaningful, descriptive and detailed, and supportive and constructive. The examples presented here illustrate the significance of tone, voice, purpose, and scope, as well as the various roles the instructor assumes throughout the feedback process. Earl (2013) refers to this type of approach as “personalizing feedback” in which “language choice, level of explanation given and amount of praise in feedback can vary with a teacher’s understanding of students’ needs and ability” (164). At this point, it is important to recognize the virtual elephant in the online classroom: the amount of time, energy, and commitment it takes to provide highly effective written feedback. As one instructor new to online teaching noted in a recent study:

The time consuming part . . . because the interaction is tailored to the individuals, whereas the face-to-face, on-campus class, you can give a general response, and everybody gets it, whereas with online, e-mail, and then the discussion, you know, it’s . . . almost like individualized instruction times 25 or however many students in your class. (Huang and Hsiao 2012, 27)

⁵Beyond the written teacher feedback discussed in this article, additional teacher–student interaction occurs via electronic means (phone, Skype, eChat).

⁶Archival tasks (e.g., Big Ideas Bucket) provide online students with support mechanisms for identifying, collecting, and assembling meaningful work of their own, or of others (peers, scholars and theorists we have read, and others from students’ research) over the course of the semester. A separate discussion board for archival tasks is recommended.

I conclude by offering a few practical tips and strategies in terms of online dance educators' time and energy.

Create Feedback Templates

For each assignment or learning task, create a general feedback template that briefly covers what's most important for students to understand (two or three big ideas). Use the template as a starting point for personalizing feedback specifically to the individual student's strengths and challenges. Some recurring writing assignments, like the summary papers described earlier, might warrant two templates: one for students whose papers meet or exceed expectations and another template for those whose papers do not. Monique's summary paper feedback in this article is based primarily on the latter template.

Highlight the Students' Words

Consider how much instructor language online students already read on the course website. Writing feedback gives dance educators the opportunity to use and focus on the student's words by using a "hold on to this!" approach illustrated in this article. As appropriate, embed space within the general template for including key points the student expressed and then respond to them. In my experience, students appreciate this kind of attention to their work, and this approach keeps me energized and motivated, especially when I'm writing feedback for the last four or five assignments of each module. Olivia's task-based assignment feedback is an example of this strategy. When extended over time and assignments, this approach can develop engaged teacher-student dialogue as Elise's values inventory feedback initiates.

Consider Timeliness and Timing

Research appears to indicate that students might find the timeliness of feedback more important than the extent of feedback; however, researchers note that "it is possible that students would respond differently if timely feedback were at the expense of instructive feedback" (Dennen, Darabi, and Smith 2007, 76). In a more recent study, online students considered two to three days as a reasonable amount of time between assignment submission and instructor feedback (Getzlaf et al. 2009); however, the study did not specify assignment or task types. With this in mind, I suggest considering feedback timeliness and timing together by using the following strategies from my own experience:

- Alert students that "an assignment submitted is an assignment that will be graded." Because a number of students post assignments early, begin evaluating them and writing feedback a day before the deadline. Post student feedback immediately and alert them that you have. This saves time in the long run, mitigates feedback fatigue, and provides students with the timely feedback they appreciate.

- Other students prefer to post all of their assignments just prior to the deadline. Evaluate, write, and post feedback in the order in which students submitted their assignments. If you notice consistent student clusters submitting at or near the deadline, consider rotating the order in which you write feedback. Otherwise, some of these "at the deadline" students might fall victim to teacher feedback fatigue.
- Inevitably, a few students will post assignments past the deadline, some consistently. Consider establishing a policy like this one that protects the instructor's time, energy, and productiveness: "Late assignments, unless previously approved, will not receive instructor feedback; partial credit for assignments may be awarded at the instructor's discretion."
- Generally, timing of feedback depends on assignment quantity and type. Regardless of the feedback timing you determine is appropriate and reasonable, make students aware. For my online courses with 25 or fewer students, feedback is normally returned to students within 48 hours after the submission deadline, although sometimes sooner, given the preceding strategies.

Contemplate the Feedback Scope

In quantitative terms, the research jury is out when considering the scope (range and length) of instructor written feedback. The few studies that have been published do not take into account the type or nature of assignments. If we apply the higher education standard that one credit hour equals three hours of faculty contact and preparation time, each of the sample courses used in this article would equate to a total instructor workload of nine clock hours per week for each course. Writing feedback makes up much of online dance educators' work, but time is also required for responding to student e-mails; holding virtual office hours; conferencing with students via cell phone, Skype, or GoogleTalk; monitoring discussion chats; posting announcements; and resolving technology issues for students. At best, the credit hour-workload formula would leave eight hours per week for reading assignments and writing feedback. Although based on the examples and recommendations presented earlier, what I can share regarding feedback scope is mostly anecdotal:

- When possible, match the scope and length of your feedback to what you perceive as the time and energy expended by the student. Normally, matching in this way is appropriate and beneficial to the student and instructor; however, sometimes this can be a slippery slope. Check for instances when your perceptions of effort do not coincide with a student's actual effort (e.g., "It looks as though you may have run out of time to complete assignments in the module").
- Read each assignment from beginning to end before formulating any impressions or feedback comments. Get an overarching sense of the student's thought processes and presentation. For students whose work needs significant support and feedback, schedule a synchronous meeting to

discuss, rather than spending two hours writing copious feedback that might or might not be read.

- Consider feed-forward strategies for written feedback, in which brief, yet succinct individual learning plans or targets are articulated for students' future assignments and tasks (Duncan 2007).

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