

Simplifying Substantive Student Feedback

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I had a problem.

I knew meaningful substantive feedback was important and valuable.

But I felt like we were spending too long doing it.



Goals for this morning

1. How and why does substantive feedback matter?
2. What is the most significant barrier to providing helpful but efficient feedback?
3. Offering some strategies to make feedback more efficient.
4. Workshopping those strategies.



What is feedback and why do we care: scholarly research

In a "natural experiment" at the University of Minnesota Law School, students in one section received higher levels of individual feedback than others. Daniel Schwarcz, Dion Farganis, [*The Impact of Individualized Feedback on Law Student Performance*](#), 67 J. Legal. Educ. 139, 143 (2017). They outperformed those who did not "in every single class"—not just the ones where feedback was greater. "[I]ndividualized feedback can disproportionately benefit the subset of students who incur the largest costs to attend law school and who are most at risk of failing the bar exam or being unable to land desirable postgraduate employment." Schwarcz and Farganis's experiment "rigorously confirm[ed] what much of the extant literature suggestions—that providing students with individualized feedback designed to help them learn does indeed promote learning in law school." *Id.* p. 174.



What is feedback and why do we care: anecdotes from student evaluations

"I would like to see more feedback on papers. Professors most often put in a grade with no feedback. We all put a lot of time and effort into each paper and it is *very disheartening to only have a grade at the end.*" (Overall Program NPS: 10) September 2020

"Requiring feedback on asynchronous assignments from professors is vital. Going the entire session without any feedback on the written answers given is very frustrating and demotivating because there's *no way of knowing if we're understanding the concepts without feedback.*" (Overall Program NPS: 9) September 2020

"There are a couple of professors who are not good at responding to students' emails or providing feedback on assignments. Twice I received an overall grade, but not one online assessment was filled in i.e., participation points, journal grade, final paper grade. It made me feel like the professor never looked at anything and *just assigned a grade based on how much he liked me.*" (Overall Program NPS: 10) September 2020

"I *wish the professors would be more timely with grading and give feedback* on papers/projects that we have worked hard on. I find it discouraging to only see a grade with something that I worked really hard on, was proud of and get no feedback." (Overall Program NPS: 10) January 2020

"I would like the professors to give more feedback on papers. We spend a lot of time on these, often a substantial part of our final grade, and never receive any feedback. I would really appreciate any and all feedback, not just a final grade." (Overall Program NPS: 10) May 2020

"Not much feedback on the exams. Need to know where I am and how to improve. Otherwise, *I am just going to keep doing the same stupid thing over and over!*" (Course NPS: 6) January 2020

Caruso Law MLS NPS Data: Jan 2018 to Jan 2021

We looked at empirical data from three years in our MLS program.

<i>"Feedback & Grading" Autotag Theme among All Responses</i>					
	Negative Theme Responses	% Overall	Positive Theme Responses	% Overall	Total Responses
<i>Course Level</i>	193	5.56%	102	2.94%	3469
<i>Program Overall</i>	36	3.80%	2	0.21%	948

Surprise! Only ~8% of student evaluations mention feedback.

Roughly twice the number of responses mentioned it in a negative connotation than positive. But:

There was no apparent correlation to the overall "faculty" scores.

There was even less correlation to program or course satisfaction. By comparison:

Faculty as an individual category ranked between ~20% and ~30%, with positive connotations X2 negative and a strong correlation to program satisfaction.



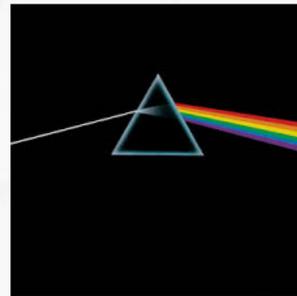
Conclusions from scholarly, anecdotal and empirical evidence on feedback

- Feedback benefits students not only in practice-oriented classes such as LRW or clinical work, it has an outsized benefit in doctrinal classes. Especially for students under the medians in LGPA and LSAT.
- It is unclear how much feedback affected overall satisfaction with individual faculty members but statistically speaking, it does not impact program satisfaction, which remains extremely high even among anecdotal negative commentators.
- My takeaway: substantive feedback is more about providing a good learning experience and improving pedagogy than about ensuring student satisfaction with the program (and maybe even individual faculty).



Feedback Workshop: A few challenges

- How do you maintain anonymity if that is necessary or desired?
- How do we avoid the timing problem of giving tough feedback or grades and hurting our student evals?
- How do we deliver feedback? In person, online, email, write/scan, redlined, line-edits, video, group versus individual, grading boxes, rubric sheets, exam answers?
- How do you tailor the feedback to the type of assignment? Is the goal knowledge or skills based? What even is “good substantive feedback”?
- Any challenges particular to the online modality?
- *What’s the biggest challenge?*





Feedback Workshop: The Biggest Challenge: **Time**

- Thorough, helpful, feedback can take a lot of time.
- Full time tenured, LRW, and clinical faculty are busy with teaching, scholarship, and service.
- In almost all instances, adjunct faculty have alternate full time jobs.
- Feedback is part of the job, but from a faculty standpoint, I have had faculty members at Pepperdine and at other conferences tell me they spend up to two hours per assignment providing feedback. I'm sure others can spend (a lot) more.
- From an administrative standpoint, I have to balance the benefits of providing thorough feedback against the costs of lower class sizes, distracting top scholars with large or demanding teaching loads, and burning out adjuncts, very few of whom teach for the money.



Feedback Workshop: Efficient feedback (Part 1).

- How to provide substantive feedback under time constraints? There's good news and bad news.
 - The bad news is that there are no shortcuts to the careful reading we need to do to give thorough, substantive feedback. There's an absolute floor on how much time feedback (and grading) takes. But there's also no ceiling. The good news is we can help find a ceiling. How?
- 1. A little work ahead of time saves a lot of work down the road.**
 - Write canned feedback points: e.g., active v. passive, short and plain statements, IRAC elements.
 - DIY: Outline case briefs; write your own discovery responses; draft model answers for exams.
 - Use anonymous but specific commentary in class, on your LMS, or in emails to your class.
 - 2. Ask yourself what are you trying to accomplish with the feedback and stick to only that.**
 - If you are teaching analysis, focus on analysis; doctrine focus on information; writing focus on writing; strategy focus on strategy.
 - Feedback \neq grading. Rubrics and points are assessment tools; feedback is a teaching tool.



Feedback Workshop: Efficient feedback (Part 2)

3. Use specific examples but do not micromanage every mistake.

- You are not line editing. We're not on Law Review anymore and this isn't law practice.
- You do not need to change every " to a "
- The student was given feedback on every instance of passive voice when they didn't have to be.

4. Tell the student why it matters.

- E.g., why active voice; why typographical errors hurt your message; if communication is about communicating, why being unclear is a Hobson's Sword; why adjectives and emphasis are absolutely, **clearly**, poor advocacy.
- (This is an extra step but it helps students understand why you haven't corrected everything.)

5. Put the action item on the student.

- Explain the problem clearly but let them suggest or grapple with how to fix it.
- Invite students with remaining questions or who seek more detailed feedback to follow up with you.
- We share the initial burst of feedback then put the onus on them. (This satisfies the majority of students)!



Feedback Workshop: What if I get stuck?

Short compliment of style

Short, clear sentences with apt, precise language.

Short criticism of style

You never really gave us the rule, you only danced around it in your analysis. IRAC = state the rule before the applying it to the facts.

Short compliment of substance

Excellent analysis of the citizenship issue. You referenced all the key facts for the five factors in the second prong of the International Shoe analysis.

Short criticism of substance

Since there was general jurisdiction over the party you did not need to reach the minimum contacts/Int'l Shoe analysis.



Feedback Workshop: Breakout Groups

Speed-feedback practice. Breakout rooms will be 4-5 persons. 2x2 exemplars.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NtiyALOFmSz-GM7wRoWKkuzA3BOKfE-qo_IDhCIpe-0/edit?usp=sharing

1. Each person choose one of the exemplars to start with.
2. Take about two minutes to review and come up with one up and one down.
3. Then trade. Then share.
4. We'll reconvene in about 15 minutes for a debrief.

If you finish early, feel free to critique my suggestions today, or you can consider a discussion question:

How might these strategies work better online than they might in person? Or is it vice versa?



Feedback Workshop: Closing thoughts

- I originally prepared and gave a version of this presentation to a group of online faculty but the strategies apply on ground too.
- Mine is primarily an administrator's perspective. I wanted happy but educated students, thriving faculty, and a popular program. The program is fine. Focus on the learning.
- Focusing only on student learning enables us to be targeted—faster—with our feedback.
- Any thoughts on how these strategies work better online than they might in person?

The online modality offers some built in efficiencies, but we have peculiar risks.



Feedback Workshop: The End

THANK YOU!

If you have any suggestions, questions or comments I'd love to hear from you: Jason.Jarvis@pepperdine.edu