INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK: HOW MUCH DO STUDENTS REALLY WANT?

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is generally considered beneficial. Marketing students expect and request feedback on exams, papers, and other assignments. Students and instructors alike believe that feedback helps students and learning. Some marketing professors expend a great deal of time and effort in providing individualized and substantive comments in response to student work. Doing so becomes extremely challenging and time consuming when faced with large class sizes and high student-faculty ratios. This is particularly true when student-learning objectives are communications-intensive, with coursework consisting of oral presentations, written assignments, cases analyses, essay exams, and the like.

Such realities have led these authors to question whether and how feedback is actually used by students. This exploratory study examines the impact of feedback, specifically written feedback, on student emotions and perceptions. Is more instructor feedback on assignments always good? Do students want feedback, use it, and if so, how much? The answers are important from the point of view of facilitating learning, and also from the point of view of instructors' workload management.

THE VALUE OF FEEDBACK

Feedback is generally considered essential to effective learning. However, it has received little attention in the marketing education literature, and Higgins et al. (2002) noted that understanding feedback from a student perspective has received surprisingly little attention in the education literature. Carless (2006) argued that the effects of feedback on students are not only under-researched, but more complex than typically acknowledged.

Marketing instructors who have taught for any time notice much variability in student desire for feedback. Research shows that not everyone seeks feedback with equal effort, and ironically it is often those who need it the most who desire it the least. Further, comments viewed as helpful by instructors are often regarded as less helpful by students. Yorke (2003) argued that an awareness of the psychology of giving and receiving feedback is important for understanding its effects on student learning. There are further some documented social psychological phenomena – the negativity effect and self-serving bias – which suggest that feedback can have negative, even harmful, effects.

METHOD

A between-subjects experimental design measured perceptual and emotional reactions to different amounts of feedback on a hypothetical assignment.

Students were asked to read a slide stating, "You have just received a failing grade of 'F,' 52 out of 100 points on your paper for a Marketing Strategy course." Students in three conditions – no further feedback, low feedback (two pre-tested comments), and high feedback (11 pre-tested comments) – then responded to a questionnaire. Items measured satisfaction with performance; the degree to which students felt the instructor giving the feedback would have a negative impression of them; students' attributions of how much the poor performance was based on ability, luck, and task difficulty; and the perceived fairness and perceived helpfulness of the feedback. Finally, students responded to an emotions inventory listing 15 positive and negative emotions.

RESULTS

Providing more feedback had a negative effect on the perceived helpfulness of the comments, even though each comment was perceived by students in a pre-test to be equally helpful. However, students in the high feedback condition did perceive the assignment as being less difficult and were less likely to attribute the poor performance to task difficulty. This suggests that feedback may have the effect of shifting perceived responsibility for poor performance onto the student. Overall, other findings suggest that instructors may want to limit the feedback given to students after a disappointing performance, at least keeping it to a moderate level.

References Available on Request