

## Rubric's Cube: Borden and Busse as a Feedback Model in Online Education

**G. Mihalyi Szirony**

Walden University

**Jason D. Kushner**

University of Arkansas at Little Rock

**Jose M. Maldonado**

Liberty University

**Laurie A. McArthur**

Walden University

### Abstract

*Feedback is a key factor in learning and understanding. Evidence supports students value quality online feedback methods. Rubrics are appearing more frequently in online learning, a helpful and specific component that provides feedback to students. Expectations of learners include fair and objective grading, justification for the grade, and suggestions on how to improve when feedback warrants the need. Utilizing the concepts of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, reflection, and reinforcement are considered. In this article, a feedback model that serves as a teaching and learning asset in online formats based upon Borden and Busse's four phased model of communication is presented, adapted to the online teaching and learning environment. Application of the model in terms of efficacy, fairness, objectivity, and feedback are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Feedback, Distance Education, Reflection, Rubrics, Grading Rubrics

Feedback in teaching and learning is a powerful yet delicate art that can lead to true learning and understanding or to utter frustration. According to Clynes and Raftery (2008), feedback is an interactive process, one that is designed to provide insight into learner performance, with dialogic feedback found to be effective (Espasa, Guasch, Mayordomo, Martínez-Melo, & Carless(2018). Students value quality feedback(Weaver 2006), important in intercultural as well as multicultural settings (Blair, 2017). However, just like feedback during a job evaluation or annual review, productive feedback appears to be more valuable. To paraphrase Shaughnessy (2019), teachers are arguably one of the most potent factors in student growth and development. Treating student work with respect, including online discussion posts, research papers, or other such submitted contributions, is one of the four expectations of learners, as noted by Moore and Kearsely (2012).

Other expectations of learners include fair and objective grading, justification for the grade, and suggestions on how to improve if feedback warrants such. On the other hand, condescending or patronizing feedback with little useful information associated with the feedback may be counterproductive. Rubrics have found an increasing presence in distance education settings (Cockett & Jackson, 2018). However, shared experience adds support not only to feedback commentary, but to the research that supports these concepts as well. Feedback is a key factor in learning and understanding.

Too often, however, education is rife with non-constructive feedback that inconsistent and unclear (Dawson, 2017; Menéndez-Varela, & Gregori-Giralt, 2018; Sadler, 2010). When effectively dispensed, feedback can serve as the catalyst in what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), leading to true learning and understanding. It is in that reflection and effective feedback that the quantum leap is made to meaningful acquisition of knowledge as both student and institution sharpen focus on student satisfaction (Costello & Crane, 2016; Li, Marsh, & Rienties (2016).

Feedback plays a crucial role in learning (Van Popta, Kral, Camp, Martens, & Simons (2017), and is particularly so in an online environment (Leibold & Schwarz, 2015). In Vygotsky's ZPD, a zone exists in which the learner maintains a close or "proximal" relationship to development, ergo, the Zone of Proximal Development. In this reflection is the essence of learning, and without it, little is learned. Volumes of data can be presented with all the material possible, and until each unique, diverse, individual learner reflects upon the raw data presented, assimilates it into her or his own experience, it remains merely fact, not understanding. Charles F. Kettering, inventor and engineer noted, "There is a great difference between knowing a thing and understanding it. You can know a lot about something and not really understand it" (Boyd, 2002, p. 21).

### ***Reflection***

Vygotsky (1978) described reflection as an essence of learning, which can be learned (Zuckerman, 2004), and without it, little is learned. Learners can be presented with all the material possible, and until student learners reflect upon what is presented and assimilates it into their own experience, it remains merely fact, not knowledge. Understanding the premise that learners modify study behavior based on feedback (Kulhavy, et al., 1990), a construct referred to as response feedback can alter the student perception of how better to respond. Being able to link new information does indeed require a place to which new information can be linked. In this reflective learning process, an internal venue for learning may be found.

Quinton and Smallbone (2010) asserted that reflection is an essential component of feedback, which educators should promote and reinforce in the classroom setting. Quinton and Smallbone created a model of reflection that utilized reflective questioning regarding feedback provided to students on an assignment that, in turn, the student would continue to incorporate into future work and studies.

Reflection has long been considered an essential factor in learning and is well documented. The spectre of reflection is widely accepted across the field of learning (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016). Reflection can serve as an assessment strategy as well as a forum for learning, adding dimensionality to the pedagogical concept. Inherent in the reflective process, making meaning of lived experience is a common instinctual drive in human behavior (Mezirow, 2003). The connection between reflection and the feedback mechanism of Borden and Busse's 4 phase model is organic.

### ***Feedback***

Effective feedback in an online environment is an important skill set for educators (Leibold & Schwarz, 2015). The significance of feedback in teaching and learning is well established (Cooper, 2008; Sadler, 2010; Williams & Kane, 2009). According to Harrison et al. (2013), little evidence currently exists regarding how to deliver effective feedback to students, and despite well-intentioned educators and expert assessors, the impact of feedback may be limited, particularly if the feedback is unclear or not specific enough (Crisp, 2007). Complicating the matter, it has been suggested that a student's main focus may be on the grade and not the feedback. Crisp continued to point out a growing paradigm in literature on student feedback, suggesting that those instructors assessing student activities and assignments should not assume that the student will respond in kind to the feedback provided. To add to the predicament, as George Bernard Shaw quipped, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Because of the growing complexity of delivering an effective learning experience (Cooper, 2008), prompt, effective and meaningful feedback is a necessity. Returning to classic communication theory, the symbiotic relationship of sender and receiver evinces the need to rethink the feedback process in a systematic interaction of communication, sending a clear and focused message to the student in hopes that the message will be received. The completed cycle or process of evaluation, providing clear, specific and focused feedback, combined with assimilation of that feedback, forms a cycle of communication that requires reflection on the part of the recipient of that feedback. The cycle of communication raises the question of who is responsible, then, to determine whether the message was clear, specific, and focused enough to provide useful and meaningful value. Moreover, learning and development is dependent on learners receiving meaningful feedback they understand. According to Kite & Phongsavan (2017), assessment in feedback must be clear, fair, and appropriate.

Examining models of feedback communication can help to provide methods of disseminating useful information to students during the process of assessing specific learning activities with commentary that is fair and appropriate. Communicating effective and meaningful feedback could be delivered via a model of communication such as the Borden and Busse method, modified for educational purposes. Feedback, reflection, and in particular, constructivism coalesce to form a salient part of the teaching process. These constructs form one of the most useful mechanisms for students, although without adding "constructive" to "feedback," the results can be tragic and have long term effects. A phenomenon associated with student feedback is the mirror effect, as reflection can reverse, rebounding onto the teacher. One of the aspects of the nature of learning is in its individuality. A curious dichotomy occurs in group learning activities, such as the types that might be seen in distance learning settings. Peer constructivist learning has been shown to be a powerful way of gaining new knowledge. Constructivism, with emphasis on progressive elaboration of knowledge through personal and group activity is central to current theories of learning (Anderson, 2016). According to Williams (2002), several factors are relevant to effectiveness in learning in an online environment, and among the most important are those of the ability for learners to share experiences, providing cases, analogies, and examples. The self-directedness of the learning experience places this type of learning at a high level.

### ***Types of Feedback***

Pyke and Sherlock (2010) outlined three types of feedback instructors utilized when working with students in online educational settings. These include corrective, motivational, and technology-based feedback. Corrective feedback provides individuals with information regarding the content of their work in order to correct errors, thus improving the quality of the work. Motivational feedback seeks to motivate individuals, which according to Kulhavy and Wagner (1993) is essential to continued success in the future. Technological feedback is associated with potential technological errors that might arise in an online classroom, along with new forms of technology that might present themselves in the classroom.

Ellis (2008) presented a typology of various types of modalities utilized to deliver feedback to students on written assignments. These include direct corrective feedback, indirect feedback, metalinguistic feedback, focused and unfocused feedback, electronic feedback, and reformulation. Direct corrective feedback occurs when the educator provides the student with the correct answer. Indirect corrective feedback occurs when the educator identifies the problem but does not provide the solution or correct answer to the student. With metalinguistic feedback, the educator provides written feedback in the margin of the paper identifying where the problem lies. The feedback focus (unfocused or focused) depends on whether or not some or all of the errors are corrected by the educator. Electronic feedback occurs when a web link, which contains the correct answer or a similar example, is provided to the student. Reformulation occurs when an educator provides a revision of the original piece so that the content is modified to be grammatically correct, while ensuring that the original meaning of the material is maintained (Ellis, 2008).

Lemley, Sudweeks, Howell, Laws, and Sawyer (2007) discussed three types of feedback utilized by educators. These include knowledge of results feedback, knowledge of correct response feedback, and elaboration feedback. Knowledge of results feedback provides students with verification as to whether or not they provided the correct answer. In addition to identifying whether or not a student response is accurate, knowledge of correct response feedback will also provide the student with additional information to help them understand what else needs to be completed to correctly answer the question. Finally, elaboration feedback provides detailed feedback to the student, which can be beneficial in an online learning environment, especially when students potentially have minimal access to faculty (Lemley, Sudweeks, Howell, Laws, & Sawyer, 2007).

### ***Formative versus Summative Feedback***

According to Cockett and Jackson (2018), after examining several papers relating to assessment rubrics, self-regulation and understanding of assessment were found to be enhanced by the use of rubrics, although students did report that rubrics could be restrictive, possibly resulting in increased stress levels. Also noted was an increase in student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback in general. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) introduced a seven stage feedback model to utilize when providing formative feedback to students to promote self-regulation. These stages include the following:

- goal and expectation clarification
- facilitates reflection
- provides clearconstructive feedback that promotes self-regulation in students
- promotes consultation between students, faculty, and peers
- feedback promotes motivation in the student and contributes to positive self-esteem
- feedback provides opportunities for the students to modify their work to improve overall performance, and
- feedback educates faculty about student progress along with where modifications might need to be made to the educator's curriculum or technique.

Following that, Ackermans, Rusman, Brand-Gruwel, and Specht(2016) proposed a process of synthesizing rubrics into classes, positing analytic rubrics as essential for the formative assessment of complex skills.

### ***Communication Models***

Accordingly, the feedback sandwich consists of three components to providing feedback(Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, & Epstein, 2013). Initially some form of positive feedback is identified, followed by an area of weakness, followed by another positive component (Glover, 2003). The feedback sandwich model should utilize sensitivity when providing constructive feedback (Glover, 2000) and can be utilized to provide feedback to students or professionals. In addition to providing feedback, Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, & Epstein (2013) emphasized the importance of how the individual student internalizes and utilizes the feedback provided. According to Ackermans et al. (2016), construction of knowledge is essential for students to master complex skills. Constructive feedback is not beneficial if the individual does not incorporate the feedback into future practice.

Glover (2000) conducted a case study discussing the importance of feedback when working with nursing students, outlining the feedback sandwich model as a means of educating students about strengths and limitations. Gloverconcluded that it was necessary to ensure that feedback is understood, emphasizing the benefits of providing feedback to improve skill set and confidence when accurately incorporated into practice by the student (Leibold& Schwarz, 2015).Finding the sandwich model somewhat lacking, the authors provide a model that may better address the issues.

### ***Rubric's Cube***

Rubrics are fast becoming ubiquitous in distance learning venues. Designed to serve as rating scales rather than checklists, rubrics are conventionally divided into two categories: holistic versus analytic. Holistic rubrics, sometimes known as global rubrics, can be thought of as a cubic or multidimensional construct, e.g., Rubric's Cube. Holistic rubrics view the overall product as opposed to analytic rubrics, where components of the project or student performance are scored individually (Brookhart & Nitko, 2015). Regardless of which approach is used depending on the application, rubrics have been criticized for limiting creativity and critical thinking (Mertler, 2001). Rather than a student focus on learning, the student is more likely to work toward the grading of the rubric. Mertler (2001) wrote, "One potentially frustrating aspect of scoring student work with rubrics is the issue of somehow converting them to grades" (p. 4). An improperly designed rubric can limit student work and limit creativity instead of completing an important assignment. Although rubrics might be thought of or designed to operationalize, move toward, or improve objectivity in grading, a degree of subjectivity may be seen as inherent in the process, in spite of the intention. Nonetheless, embedded rubrics are becoming quite common in distance education settings, although analytic formats appear to be preferred over holistic in that the degree of feedback to the student from the teacher can be more significant and specific. For example, the Blackboard learning platform now has built-in, in-line, "clickable" rubrics that can be added to the scoring portion of the assignment or discussing grading process.

### ***Communication in Online Learning Environments***

Vonderwell (2003) asserted that social interaction is an important component of online learning, outlining how the lack of non-verbal communication can influence the learning environment. Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion(2012) further purported that non-verbal communication was lacking in the online learning environment, which was received either positively or negatively by students.

Some level of communication was substituted with phone calls, which helped to humanize students and faculty, thus promoting connection (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012). In addition, communication may have also been substituted by posting images, utilizing emoticons in student discussion posts, or even encouraging the use of personalized messages to other students as a means of substituting affect that may otherwise be observed in the face-to-face classroom environment. As education continues its odyssey toward distance learning venues, concern for efficacious feedback parallels.

Vonderwell (2003) reported that students appeared to demonstrate higher levels of communication in online settings, whereas students in land based schools expressed hesitance to communicate in the learning environment. Online learning environments provided students with the courage to choose to either become engaged in the discussion or to avoid interacting with classmates. However, the online learning environment can result in feelings of isolation in students (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012; Vonderwell, 2003).

### ***Borden and Busse***

Nearly a century ago, Borden and Busse (1929) proposed a model of interpersonal communication originally intended for the world of business although potentially applicable in a wider variety of settings. Borden and Busse proposed a four step communication process that seemed to address the construct of influential interpersonal verbal and written communication and interaction, one that might be referred to as the 'Borden and Busse Four Phase Model.' Borden & Busse originally proposed the use of 4 steps or phases in which to deliver a response in a business setting. That same model may be useful in presenting feedback to students in a proximal learning situation. The original four phases were:

- 1) Ho-hum crasher
- 2) Why Bring that Up
- 3) For Instance, and
- 4) So What

Beginning with the Ho-hum Crasher serves as a bridge statement that captures the importance of the feedback, sets the foundation for the process of microlearning and is intended to capture as well the reader's (in this case, the student's) attention. The next phase, a step referred to by Borden and Busse as, "Why bring that up?" provides the meaning to the feedback. The 3rd step, "For instance," provides an example or three, and the last step, "So what," provides a concluding remark that packages the feedback and presents the opportunity for the student to make the quantum leap (in her or his own time and space) to the formulation of new knowledge. These four steps can be as simple as 4 sentences or phrases, or even combining more than one step into a sentence. A method of providing feedback in the distance learning environment that could provide useful and meaningful feedback and opportunities for growth in online courses comes from Borden and Busse's four phased model of communication.

### ***Application of Borden and Busse to Counselor Education***

Borden and Busse's (1929) four stage model of communication can be applied to situations where feedback is provided to counselor education and other students. As noted earlier, the four phase model originally consisted of;

- 1) Ho-hum crasher
- 2) Why Bring that Up
- 3) For Instance, and
- 4) So What

When modifying this model to apply it towards providing feedback to students, several considerations must be taken. The four levels could include:

- Stage 1, the attention getter, alerts the student that there is a problem and improvements need to be made to their work. During this stage, the professor or supervisor would review the work of students and provide recommendations to improve their skill sets.
- Stage 2, why bring that up, or what's the point, breaks down the feedback, and helps the student to understand the reason for the feedback and need for modification to their work. During this stage, the professor would explain the feedback, outlining areas where students could improve their skills.

- Stage 3, for instance, provides an example of what the correct answer or response would look like, or in the case of writing papers, it would outline the appropriate format and style.
- Stage 4, so what, is the conclusion, the reflective component that would summarize briefly the information and provide the student with the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and reflect upon what they learned in order to improve insight and skill set (See Figure 2).

### ***Application to an Online Learning Environment***

Providing feedback in a distance learning setting proves challenging because face-to-face contact is limited, and students are obligated to be more independent through the use of self-monitoring (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011). According to Eom and Wen (2006), students who are engaged in an online learning environment are required to be more self-regulated. Therefore, the student must remain motivated, review the feedback provided on assignments, reflect upon that feedback, and identify how they can incorporate this information provided into future assignments.

Lemley, Sudweeks, Howell, Laws, and Sawyer (2007) asserted that students in the online learning environment communicate minimally with professors; therefore, the feedback students receive in the online learning environment is an important component of the course. Lemley et al. found that participants who received immediate feedback obtained higher scores in their coursework as opposed to those who received delayed feedback in the online learning environment.

### ***For Example***

An example of applying Borden and Busse to the subjective component of a rubric, the four stage model followed in order could be used. For example, following an objective grading response, the subjective component could be framed as (simplified here for readability):

- Stage 1 (Attention getter) -Interesting article/discussion/comments, (student name).
- Stage 2 (Why bring that up?) -Your work is supportive of the material in the lesson.
- Stage 3 (For instance) -For example, ... (1, 2, or 3 examples here).
- Stage 4 (So what) -In conclusion, your article, discussion/comment was content rich and well informed although you could have... (example).

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, feedback is a key factor in learning and understanding. Productive feedback appears to be valued by students. Effective feedback can be incorporated into online learning environments with embedded rubrics appearing more frequently in distance education course design. Yet, providing fair and equitable feedback in a distance learning setting can prove to be challenging because face-to-face contact is limited, as students are obligated to be more independent by the very nature of online learning. Students then, through the use of self-monitoring, rely on feedback to gauge progress as well as increase in learning and understanding of material, particularly complex material often seen in graduate courses, for example. The Borden and Busse model, customized toward an online learning environment, illustrated in embedded rubrics, offers a template for educators to offer quality, efficacious feedback in a fair, equitable, and positive framework. Further research is needed.

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**Figure 1.**

Original Borden and Busse Model

Borden, R.C., & Busse, A.C. (1929). *How to win a sales argument*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

1. Ho-hum Crasher
2. Why Bring That Up?
3. For Instance
4. So What

**Figure 2. Modified Feedback Model**