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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I ran across an interesting idea in the British journal, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* involving the use of something called interactive cover sheets. First-year students in an outdoor studies degree program took a two-semester, six module course which required preparation of a number of written assignments. After preparing their papers, students attached an interactive cover sheet on which they raised questions about the paper they had just completed, thereby identifying the specific areas for feedback.

The goal was to overcome the one-way communication that occurs when teachers write comments on student papers. Students prepare the papers, teachers grade them and write comments providing feedback which they hope explains the grade and simultaneously offers advice, suggestions and insights that help the student write a better paper next time.

But often the feedback does not achieve these goals. Most all of us can tell stories about how students respond to our comments including those who don't read them at all and many others who may read the feedback but show no signs of understanding or acting on it in subsequent papers. Students also tell stories about feedback received on their papers — the illegible scrawl that can't be read, the comments they just plain don't understand, the very negative/critical tone that reinforces their sense of inadequacy as writers. In many cases it just isn't a very successful exchange of information.

Does this idea of having students frame questions about their papers and writing offer a solution? The faculty who tried the approach found that students struggled mightily with the task, even though they had participated in a workshop designed to help them understand what kinds of questions they could ask. And a lot of the questions they did ask were not about aspects of their writing that should have been of concern.

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It's pretty easy to understand why students would find this task challenging. Most (especially beginning students) have little or no experience assessing their own work and then to have to frame a question that would elicit feedback helpful to improving your next paper — that's a pretty complicated task. But it's such a good one. To be able to look at something you've written, drawn, or otherwise performed and ask a question that will elicit helpful feedback — that's a really useful skill and some students did see the value of what they were being asked to do. Beyond future applications, the faculty who developed the task also thought that if students had the power to focus the feedback from their teacher, that might increase their motivation to improve.

I wonder if there might be some ways to reframe the task that would make it easier initially. Maybe students need guidelines early on: Identify the part of the paper you had the most trouble with and ask a question about it. Identify the part of the paper you think turned out best and explain why you feel good about it. Maybe students complete the interactive cover sheet and attach it to a draft of the paper so they aren't worried that identifying a problem will call the teacher's attention to it and result in a lower grade. Maybe some peer review could be used to help students generate possible questions. Maybe this is an approach better suited for more senior students.

The faculty proposing this approach didn't want to add more to teachers' grading work. Their idea was that the comments teachers provided would be in response to the questions students raise. But what if students don't ask questions about the aspects of their papers that really need to improved? Perhaps with beginning writers (performers, etc.) it is a combination of response to questions student ask and commentary faculty direct toward other aspects of the writing or performance.

I'm not sure they got the task fitted to the developmental level of their students all that well, but I think it's a potentially promising idea with the dual benefits of developing a great self-assessment skill and directing feedback to areas that students may have some interest in improving.

Reference: Bloxham, S., and Campbell, L. (2010). Generating dialogue in assessment feedback: Exploring the use of interactive cover sheets. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 35 (3), 291-300.

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