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Please enjoy this quick-read companion to *Flash Feedback* to assist in your distance learning and help you to implement specific modifications for distance learning, while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

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Distance Learning Suggestions from *Flash Feedback*

Like most teachers in the world, in the spring of 2020 I suddenly found myself teaching online. My classes were a blend of synchronous and asynchronous, but even in the live video classes, I found there to be an odd stillness to the teaching. It was just so quiet, and traditional schools are generally loud and lively places. There is an ambient buzz that comes from 35 teenagers learning and interacting in one room; the hundreds or even thousands of tiny interactions that populate each day in the classroom; and, when one learns to look for it, the countless non-verbal pieces of information available, too—the real-time data written on the students' faces and in students' postures.

Without the background noise, the greetings at the door, the quick questions from students, and the body language, I usually felt like I was lecturing to an empty lecture hall, even as I conducted classes and student work continued to come in, and in the year-end reflections, many of my students reported similar experiences when it came to learning from home.

This quietness may on the surface seem like a cosmetic issue, but it actually speaks to one of the challenges of distanced teaching: Those countless tiny interactions aren't just nice little moments; they are critical teaching spaces. They are where we do so much of the work of getting to know the students and how they learn, show them that we care and are paying attention, build relationships with them, establish our credibility as instructors, and cultivate positive beliefs and motivation within them.

Whether we are teaching remotely or in a traditional classroom with new social distance protocols in place, our lines of communication will be different in 2020-21, and it will be harder to have the same level of interpersonal interactions in real time, yet luckily there is one consistent bridge that will remain standing no matter how far the distances between the teacher and students are: The feedback the teacher gives to students' work.

In [*Flash Feedback: Responding to Student Writing Better and Faster -- Without Burning Out*](#), I argue that when teachers look at feedback as little more than a scoresheet of what is right and what is wrong in student work, a tremendous opportunity is missed because feedback is often the main individualized contact point between teacher and student. The same is even more true when it comes to distance learning, where feedback can also play a major role in replacing those missing points of connection.

To help feedback do this though, we must be more thoughtful than ever about how we approach it. In order for it to bear this extra weight -- and in order for teachers to

manage the extra weight we will likely be bearing as we teach from a distance -- there are some important changes we need to make. None of these changes is tectonic from what is presented in *Flash Feedback*; they are instead simple reframings of the key tenets that will allow teachers to provide distanced feedback to students that is meaningful and mighty, while still focused on not contributing to burn out in an environment where that is more of a risk than ever. Some of the most important include the following:

#1: Be a Distanced Teacher, Not an Editor.

In the first chapter of *Flash Feedback*, I make an argument that we need to limit how much we mark on student papers:

We need to make fewer comments, often significantly fewer. By ignoring the urge to play an editor who marks everything, we reclaim our role as teachers. At this point, we can do what good teachers do—namely, assess the situation, prioritize what the students really need to learn right now, create clear and thoughtful lessons, and then give students the time and space to learn those lessons. (20)

Forty years of scholarship backs up the idea that being a teacher, not an editor when we respond to student work is a best practice for both the teacher and the students. And while considerable differences of opinion exist on what might constitute best practices in distance teaching and learning, at the time of this writing, one of the areas of consensus is that limiting how much content we teach will be key. Every veteran online educator or blended learning expert I've encountered has emphasized the point that we need to teach less when learning goes to any distance, because distance learning is more self-directed and students' attention span and behavior in the digital world differs rather markedly from how they are in person.

This means, in a digital learning environment, even more so than in a brick-and-mortar classroom, we need to focus on what each student needs in this moment, streamlining our feedback to only the highest priority need in a piece of writing (see the "4 Ds" on pg. 21). Save everything else for that next paper.

#2 Use Even More Flash Feedback

Flash Feedback is my term for giving quick, meaningful, and formative feedback in a minute or two by keeping many of our assignments (and our response to them) focused on one or two learning objectives. Examples include targeted response (pg. 12), single-

point rubrics (pg. 28), assessing prewriting (pg. 41), whole-class teaches (pg. 43), and micro-conferences (pg. 44).

Flash Feedback is always a key part of my feedback strategy, but in the distanced learning environment it plays an even more prominent role. In the words of blended learning expert [Catlin Tucker](#), “In the absence of face-to-face classes, teachers can communicate they care about their students’ progress by providing them with feedback on their work.”

Without so many of the regular connections that happen in class, having a consistent serve-and-return of feedback between a student and their teacher can act as a potent reminder that someone is listening to and helping to guide them.

Further, Flash Feedback techniques can be used to build community and foster connection. For example, in the spring of 2020 when my students were feeling like they needed a small shot of something positive and meaningful, I asked them to all send me a short meme/TikTok/video/gif that never fails to make them happy. I responded to these with quick words of thanks, but my real feedback came over the next two weeks as I strategically sent out a handful each day through the whole class messenger with the title “Your Morning Smile.” This affirmed each student’s individual voice and choice and brought a little sunshine into pretty dark times, yet it took no more than a few seconds for me to do each morning.

#3: Be a Very Interested Reader

On pages 36-37, I write the following about the distinction between an Interested Reader and a Detached Authority:

“I don’t believe that there exists one golden number for the exact number of comments we should give to students. Any specific rule about what to respond to will inevitably work well for some students and not for others...[Instead,] we need to think about the student, context, and our role as teacher, and then pay attention to the needs of the student. The difference between being an Interested Reader and what I refer to as the Detached Authority is nuanced but hugely important when it comes to feedback. While both the Interested Reader and Detached Authority respond to student writing by pointing out problem areas, offering suggestions, giving praise, and so on, a Detached Authority comes in with a preconceived set of rules and focuses on enforcing those; an Interested

Reader focuses instead on the writer sitting in front of him and determining what will best help that writer grow.”

Being an Interested Reader, not a Detached Authority is more efficient because it means fewer comments; it is more effective because it allows us to be more personalized and agile. It also shows that we are not just reading students’ work; we are really listening to them.

In the midst of a global pandemic, being personalized, agile, and listening to the students instead of following a preconceived set of rules, will be more important than ever because student needs and student conditions will likely be more varied than ever. Many students will likely be desperate for normalcy (some have already begged me for SAT prep, never mind the fact that there might not be a SAT this fall!); others will likely want to focus on processing our current moment; and many undoubtedly will be scared, bored, anxious, focused on activism, dealing with illness or threat of illness, and/or overwhelmed with additional responsibilities like taking care of loved ones or working extra hours to support their families.

Further, teachers’ time will likely have greater demands on it too. Given the needs of both sides, it is all the more essential that no syllable of our feedback is wasted and that our resources are poured into only the spots with the highest return on investment. Taking the stance of a Very Interested Reader who responds to individual students instead of purely curricular goals will be key to doing that.

#4: Add More of Those Little Human Touches

In chapter 4, I discuss how feedback is an ideal place to disrupt negative student beliefs like “Writing is scary,” (pg. 95), “What value does this have?” (pg. 106), or “I’m not a writer,” (pg. 112). I focus on these three beliefs for two reasons:

1. Those are the negative beliefs that I see over and over again sabotage student writing.
2. These negative beliefs are often born of poor feedback practices on the part of teachers. For a great many students, teachers are the only real audience their writing has ever had. If those students are scared or indifferent or lacking in confidence, there is a good chance that teacher feedback they’ve received before is at least somewhat to blame.

During this school year, I expect those beliefs to be as problematic as they have always been, but I think we will likely also have to add another problematic belief:

“I don’t feel like my teacher really cares about me.”

Over the spring of 2020, I often heard a statement like this when I asked them how their other classes were going. Further, dozens of students said something like this to me unprompted, and often they said it about teachers about whom I’ve never heard that accusation leveled.

I think the reason for this sudden spike in students feeling that their teachers didn’t care about them was largely a symptom of what I posed at the start: Distance learning often feels disconnected and lonely, so many students might feel that even well run classes were missing that crucial component of care.

In his book [The Culture Code](#), Danny Coyle recounts a study that found that people were 422% more likely to let a stranger borrow their phone if the stranger prefaced the request by saying “I’m so sorry about the rain,” versus a control who just asked to use the phone. At first this short, stilted comment seems like a strange candidate to prompt such a major shift in behavior. However, the researchers theorized that even this comment was enough to signal a relationship, and that changed everything about how the strangers’ brains approached the situation.

The wise intervention (see wise interventions on pg. 94 of *Flash Feedback*) of taking small moments to signal a relationship will be crucial to disrupting student narratives about teachers not caring—narratives that could cause serious damage to our students’ learning and emotional well-being if left unchecked. Further, like most wise interventions, if done well, the time investment needed to do this can be minimal. My favorite intervention for doing this is using audio and video feedback tools as a part of my feedback arsenal when I provide comprehensive feedback (pg. 47 in *Flash Feedback*). I found last spring that coming in at the moment where teachers often cast judgment (in their feedback) with a personal audio/video note was enough to remind students that I was still there and still cared. In terms of doing this, I had particular success with [Screencastify](#) and [Mote](#), both Google Plug-ins, which allow the teacher to embed audio responses right into student papers without ever leaving the Classroom page.

#5: Get the Students Doing Even More of the Work

Student goal setting and reflection (chapter 3), peer response (chapter 5), and metacognitive self review (chapter 5) are all key parts of my approach to teaching writing instruction, but in a distance learning environment, given how much communication will likely be lost over whatever distance we have, I plan to lean on these things even more.

The theme that ties all of these strategies together, beyond all of them being about the students doing the work, is that they aren't very intuitive and must be taught directly. With that in mind, the first month of school I plan to use our new reality as an excuse to do more direct instruction, modeling, and practicing of these skills than ever before so students can help to fill in the gaps that the various distances in the classroom will inevitably cause.

In a [recent article in Education Next](#), Dr. Pamela Cantor writes the following:

One of the challenges we face is what I call “the Covid-19 paradox.” In order to be safe and keep others safe from the virus, we must be physically distant. But that means disrupting the communities and relationships in our lives—classrooms, teachers, teams, coaches, churches, friends, extended families—that are the very connections we need to feel safe, to cope with stress, and to surmount this crisis.

This Covid-19 paradox lies at the heart of why distance learning can feel so silent. When times get tough, we generally want to forge closer connections, and yet so many of the ways we do that suddenly aren't available to us. Still, while we must stay physically distant for safety, we can't afford to be emotionally or intellectually distant, as many of our students will need us this year like never before. Luckily we have tools at our disposal. We can set up consistent lines of communication over student work, use Flash Feedback to give individual responses with regularity, stay focused on the writers instead of the writing, insert wise interventions as needed, and empower the students to play a more central role in their own education—and in doing so we can rebuild those connections and make distance learning not feel so, well, distant.

Wishing you the best in 2020/2021,
Matt