



# Defining Feedback: Understanding Students' Perceptions of Feedback in the Introductory Communication Course

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**Abstract:** Feedback is an essential part of the teaching/learning processes. This statement is especially true in the introductory communication course where students receive feedback throughout the presentational speaking process. This paper explores how students define useful feedback based on 1,600 qualitative questionnaires that asked students about their perceptions of feedback. A thematic analysis of a randomly selected subset of 163 responses uncovered two themes: (1) feedback content characteristics (e.g., specific, constructive, praiseworthy, and purposive) and (2) process of instructor-provided feedback (e.g., iterative, timely). Based on these findings, a set of best practices for providing feedback is offered as a means to improve teaching/learning in the introductory communication course.

Feedback is a complex communicative activity that guides pedagogy and provides an avenue for the (co)construction of meaning between students and instructors. In an instructional setting, feedback can be used to communicate the specifics of an assignment, set instructor expectations, explain what a student is doing well, and identify areas of improvement; thus, becoming an important resource that helps students improve performance (Booth-Butterfield, 1989).

The introductory communication course is a site where feedback is especially important, where feedback takes a variety of forms (e.g., formative and summative) and comes from multiple sources (e.g., instructors, peers, family; Jones-Bodie et al., 2020). In addition, feedback is used for a multitude of

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reasons including improving oral communication skills to reducing speaking anxiety (LeFebvre, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2004). Providing meaningful feedback can help students achieve learning outcomes. More broadly, understanding feedback as a communicative process could also have implications for enhancing training and development programs and manager–employee communication in organizational settings.

Given the importance of this communicative process broadly and in the introductory communication course more specifically, it is important to understand how students define meaningful and useful feedback. As such, this paper seeks to explicate student perceptions of instructor-provided feedback that can inform common practices by instructors and administrators and facilitate teaching/learning.

## Instructor Feedback as a Communicative Process

Feedback, assessment, and evaluation are the primary means of achieving instructional objectives (Jensen & Lamourex, 1997). Instructors give feedback to guide students throughout their educational endeavors. When providing feedback, instructors do not always successfully balance providing constructive criticism with maintaining positive relationships with their students (Hadden & Frisby, 2019). Therefore, examining instructor feedback is an important avenue of scholarship because feedback is central to the teaching/learning process and is not always viewed by students as useful (Malachowski et al., 2013; Martin & Mottet, 2011). This point is especially true in the introductory communication course context where students are working toward achieving learning outcomes that are central to the communication discipline and for students' engagement with society at large (Mello, 2016).

Providing feedback is a communicative process that includes both descriptive and evaluative information to establish performance criteria while providing suggestions for improvement (Booth-Butterfield, 1989; LeFebvre, 2013; Reynolds et al., 2004). Instructor feedback should be used as more than a measure of performance. It should also be embedded in the assessment process to help students learn from instructor feedback about their mistakes (Evans, 2013; Small & Attree, 2016). To ensure instructor feedback serves this objective, it is important to understand the feedback students identify as most useful.

## Instructor Feedback and Student Outcomes

Much of the communication and instruction research on instructor feedback (e.g., Dannels et al., 2011; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2015; King, 2016) has been guided by feedback intervention theory (FIT; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). FIT suggests that when feedback is focused specifically on learning a task it will lead to more positive outcomes compared to feedback that focuses on a meta-task (i.e., feedback that is not specifically related to an assignment; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Guided by this notion, scholars have explored how instructor feedback influences student outcomes.

Scholars have identified that how instructors deliver verbal feedback influences students' perceptions of said feedback (see Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2015; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). When instructors use face-attentive communication and nonverbal immediacy behaviors students were found to view the feedback as more credible (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). The use of face-threat mitigation strategies was found to help instructors deliver feedback that students viewed positively and helped instructors maintain positive student-instructor relationships (Clark-Gordon et al., 2018; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2015). When providing written feedback, instructors' language use is important because it was found to influence students' self-efficacy and their perception of their instructor as providing emotional support. Based on these findings, scholars emphasized the value of giving personalized feedback to each student

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about their performance (Hadden & Frisby, 2019). Examining the student perspective, Dannels et al. (2011) found that students wanted instructors to provide feedback that included specific suggestions on how they could improve that focused on their work and not on them as a person. As such, it becomes important to further develop an understanding of students' perceptions of feedback and these findings could draw further connection between instructor feedback practices and students' learning outcomes.

## When Instructors Give Feedback

Examining when instructors give feedback is also extremely important as offering feedback at different times in the teaching/learning process leads to different learning opportunities for students (Hazel et al., 2011; King et al., 2000). Formative and summative feedback are central concepts that explore when different types of feedback should be delivered to students. Formative feedback—feedback that is given on low-stakes assignments that prepare students for final assessments—is an opportunity to enhance student learning by providing feedback early so it can be used to improve assignments before final submission (Bollag, 2006; Fluckiger et al., 2010). This is important in the introductory communication course because it provides students the opportunity to get feedback on low-stakes assignments (e.g., preparation outlines) so that improvements can be made before oral presentations (Broeckelman-Post & Hosek, 2014). In contrast, summative feedback is offered on major learning assessments at the end of a unit as a way to measure and communicate how much a student has learned and retained (Dixon & Worrell, 2016; Dolin et al., 2018). Iterative summative assessments can also be used when formative feedback cannot be given by scaffolding assignments, so they build on one another, and then offering forward looking feedback on each (Broadbent et al., 2018). It is important to note that for this process to be effective the quality of the feedback needs to be high (Grosas et al., 2016).

Although some scholars suggest that students do not use feedback (e.g., Crisp, 2012), Small and Attree (2016) found that students do use feedback when they believe it can be applied to improve their performance on an upcoming assignment. Students have also suggested that providing feedback throughout the semester rather than waiting until the end is more valuable (Carless, 2020) and that quality feedback (i.e., that can be used by students) is more important than quantity.

## Instructor Feedback in the Introductory Communication Course

The introductory communication course facilitates the development of transferable skills that may benefit students throughout their academic careers and lives (Ruiz-Mesa & Broeckelman-Post, 2018). The introductory communication course is central to general education throughout the country (S. Morreale et al., 2016; S. P. Morreale, 2020). Introductory communication course instructors use feedback as a motivational tool to promote student learning, improve students' presentational speaking, and reduce their students' anxiety and stress (Reynolds et al., 2004). Simply put, feedback is central to helping students improve their oral communications skills (LeFebvre, 2013). Within the introductory communication course, instructors are a key source of feedback as their comments have been found to lead to increased student performance in the area the feedback was given (Gardner et al., 2017; Smith & King, 2004).

Instructor feedback is often perceived by students to be more valuable than other forms (e.g., peer feedback; Sendlak, 2008). However, scholars suggest that valuable instructor feedback must be descriptive and constructive, as well as shared in a timely fashion (King, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2004; Simonds et al.,

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2009). Instructor praise had been suggested as a valuable form of feedback (Brophy, 1981; Titsworth, 2000). Because students may interpret and respond differently to praise, however, it cannot universally be thought of as a concrete way to enforce behaviors and actions (Brophy, 1981).

To expand research on instructor feedback, scholars have argued that the student perspective should be examined (Simonds et al., 2009). Responding to this call, Jones-Bodie et al. (2020) found that personalized instructor feedback was viewed by students as a key learning resource in the introductory course. We extend the work by Jones-Bodie et al. to examine the following research question:

**RQ:** How, if at all, do students define useful feedback in the introductory communication course?

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Participants included in this Institutional Review Board-approved study consisted of 1,860 undergraduate students at a large research-intensive university in the mid-Atlantic who were enrolled in their institution's introductory communication course during the Fall 2019 semester. The majority of participants were first-year students representing myriad majors.

Participants were invited to participate in week 9—after students had completed at least three major presentational speaking assignments—and they were able to complete the survey throughout the remainder of the semester. The invitation to participate was posted on the course learning management system (LMS) and participants were prompted to comment on their experience receiving feedback in the introductory communication course. Although not directed to specifically comment on feedback related to oral presentations, the majority of written feedback students received from their instructors focused on oral presentations and presentation outlines.

Participants provided informed consent and then answered six open-ended questions: “What is feedback? How would you define it?” “How do you receive feedback on your performance in [course number] (e.g., rubrics, written feedback, peer evals)?” “When do you want feedback? When is it most relevant?” “What type of feedback is useful/not useful?” “How can we make instructor feedback more helpful/useful?” and “Tell me about a time when you received feedback from your instructor that was helpful/useful?” Students who chose not to participate were provided an alternate assignment that earned the same amount of course credit participants received.

### Data Analysis

We began data analysis by assigning each participant a unique identifier. After an initial review of the data set, we determined that responses completed in under 60 seconds did not contain enough data for analysis. Therefore, we filtered out any participants who did not answer any questions or completed the survey in less than 60 seconds. This removed 198 submitted questionnaires and resulted in 1,662 viable participant responses for data analysis. From the remaining participant responses, we drew a 10% random sample and conducted a thematic analysis on 163 participant responses. Taking a 10% random sample provided us with a manageable subset of the data for the subsequent analysis.

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In order to analyze the subset of data, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis. We used thematic analysis because this approach allowed us to consider the meaning of participant responses across the data set in the context they were provided, rather than coding for isolated words or phrases. We began by familiarizing ourselves with the data. The first and second author reviewed the larger data set and completed an initial line-by-line reading of participant responses included in the subset of the data used for analysis. Next, the first author open coded the data using the constant comparative method to identify ideas that were recurrent and forceful across the data set (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Owen, 1984; Tracy, 2020). Participants' were provided unlimited space to respond to the open-ended questions. Therefore, if participants responses were short (e.g., one sentence or phrase) they were compared with the previous response and provided a separate code if different. When a participant's response included multiple sentences or phrases they were compared to one another. If a participant's response to a question included content that had different meaning each sentence or phrase was coded separately.

After initial codes were generated and organized into preliminary themes (e.g., codes including constructive, specific, and detailed contributed to the theme characteristics of feedback), the first and second authors met to discuss the results of the analysis. The second author reviewed the data and analysis and confirmed the preliminary themes were representative of the data. A data check—a process similar to member checks in other forms of qualitative data analysis (e.g., interviews; Tracy, 2020)—was conducted by revisiting the larger data set to confirm the themes represented participants' responses. Two additional 10% random samples were drawn—each including 164 participant responses—and the first and second authors each reviewed one additional subset of the data and confirmed the themes generated from the initial analysis represented the larger data set. We concluded our analysis by defining and naming each theme and selecting participant quotes that best represented each theme and their respective subthemes.

## Results

Our inductive thematic analysis produced two themes. We discuss them as: (1) characteristics of feedback and (2) process of feedback.

### Characteristics of Feedback

Participant responses that fit within this theme focused on identifying the specific characteristics that made the feedback from their instructors useful. They discussed different ways their instructors crafted feedback messages that made them useful. These included messages that were specific and provided suggestions for improvement, used praise to identify areas the participant did well, and contextualized rubrics used to grade students' assignments. This section further explores three subthemes: (1) specific feedback; (2) praiseworthy feedback; and (3) purposive feedback.

#### *Specific Feedback*

Participants described useful feedback as constructive and specific in nature. They explained that useful instructor feedback identified specific areas of improvement and provided suggestions as to how those improvements could be made. One participant explained, "constructive feedback is the most useful feedback since it lets you know where you may have went wrong and gives you insight into how to

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improve yourself.” Another explained, “feedback that offers changes, corrections, and helpful tips is useful.” As emphasized by these participants, feedback that was critical in a constructive way and provided specific avenues for improvement was useful. As one participant explained, feedback that was “[just a] simple comment such as when someone tells you ‘good’ or ‘great job’” or “just having a grade” were not useful forms of feedback because they do not identify specific areas of improvements or offer suggestions as to how said improvements could be made.

### ***Praiseworthy Feedback***

Praise, when used well, was also identified as a characteristic of useful feedback. Participants explained that when praise was used to identify specific aspects of their assignments that they did well it was a useful form of feedback because it let them know what they should continue to do in future assignments. However, they did not think that praise helped them improve. As one participant explained, “compliments can be helpful in knowing what you did well.” Another shared that useful instructor feedback included “praise to motivate the student.” Participants were aware that constructive, specific feedback that provided suggestions for improvement was most useful, but that being able to identify things they did well through praise from their instructor was useful and “[gave them] confidence in [their] abilities.” One participant identified that, “written praise will be more meaningful and will be more likely to influence a student than a number.” Therefore, praise was seen as a valuable form of feedback compared to just being assigned a numerical grade because it helped students identify what they did well, motivated them, and increased their confidence level.

### ***Purposive Feedback***

Connected to the desire for specific feedback, participants also identified assignment rubrics as a useful form of feedback when used well by instructors. In other words, simply being told the point value they received for each rubric category alone was described by participants as broad and not useful on their own. One participant explained, “clearly written feedback is useful. Only circled numbers on a rubric is not useful.” However, participants highlighted the usefulness of constructive feedback in the form of comments connected to each category of the rubric. As one participant said, “my [instructor] provides elaborate feedback in each category of the rubric which is incredibly helpful . . . emphasizing each rubric category is great.” When asked how feedback could be improved, one participant said instructors could “respond to every aspect of the rubric for each student.” Another explained that “instead of just using rubrics, it would be helpful if instructors were to provide explicit examples of where students need to improve and where they are doing well.” By providing a comment for each aspect of the rubric, participants explained that instructors are able to take the broad rubric and contextualize it for each student’s assignment or presentation. This was exemplified by the following participant comment: “my instructor included detailed feedback in my graded rubric that told me what I needed to work on in order to improve my public speaking abilities.”

At their core, participants characterized useful feedback as constructive and specific that focused on areas of improvement and provided strategies that could be used to improve for future assignments. Praise that was given for specific aspects of the assignment was useful in helping participants identify areas of success. Finally, when using a rubric, instructors can take a purposive approach by providing a comment for each area of the rubric which was identified as useful by participants.

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## **Process of Feedback**

Although specific characteristics of feedback were highlighted by participants as important, they also noted that the process of receiving instructor feedback was an important aspect of the feedback's usefulness. Specifically, how and when participants received their feedback from instructors were important aspects of the feedback's usefulness. The three subthemes further explored here highlight important aspects of the process discussed by participants: (1) a timely process; (2) an iterative process; and (3) a communicative process.

### ***A Timely Process***

Participants discussed the need for timely feedback upon the completion of an assignment. When assignments in a course build on one another, participants explained that getting feedback soon after completing their assignment allowed them to use the feedback to improve aspects of future assignments and remember how they did on their assignment. One participant said, "I want feedback after all assignments just so I am aware of what my strengths [and] weaknesses are and I can do better in the future." Another explained, "feedback is more relevant immediately after a presentation so it is available for the next one." In contrast, when feedback was provided long after they submitted the assignment it was not useful because they would not be able to easily recall how they did on the assignment and they likely would have done significant work on the next assignment, or could have already turned it in, without knowing how they could have improved. For example, one participant said, "I believe the feedback [I received] was always useful, but sometimes I received it too late to implement into my next presentation." Participants wanted feedback as soon as possible after the presentation was delivered in order to make sure they remember how they performed. One participant explained, "I want feedback right after a presentation and before my next presentation so that it is fresh in my head what I did wrong and how I can improve and so that I can do better next time." Another said,

I want feedback right away so I can write it down or remember since the speech would have been fresh in my head. It is definitely most relevant right after your speech. I feel like a couple days after, you are going to not be in that same performing head space that you would have been right after the speech.

Participants highlighted the value in receiving specific feedback in a timely manner after completing the assignment to make improvements on future assignments.

### ***An Iterative Process***

Receiving feedback from instructors before their final assignments were turned in, or presentations were given, was described as extremely useful to students. They explained that it allowed them to evaluate how they were doing before turning in the final assignment. For example, one participant explained that, "feedback is most relevant before an assignment is due . . . feedback before it's due is important because it will help you improve before the assignment [is due]." Another explained, "I want feedback before a presentation. This is because it will help me to better my presentation before actually giving it." Participants provided two key examples of feedback they got during the process of completing assignments in their introductory communication course that were useful: (1) using preparation outlines as an opportunity for learning and (2) using scaffolded assignments.

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**Opportunities for Learning.** Getting instructor feedback on preparation outlines was seen as an opportunity for participants to understand if they were on track for the assignment and learn about changes they could make to improve their speech before presenting it to the class. One participant explained they “want feedback on [their] outline to make sure [their] speech is coherent and heading in the right direction before [they] give the speech.” Another provided the following example: “when my outline was in the wrong direction, my instructor [gave] me pieces of advice to help me set a thesis and work from there in a more concise and correct direction.” A third shared, “I want feedback for preliminary assignments (rough drafts, preparation outline, etc.). This is relevant because it gives me ideas on how to improve my final product.” These examples highlight that participants valued feedback on their preparation outlines because it provided opportunities to learn what they could improve as they were preparing to present their speeches, so they could apply the feedback in order to present the best speech possible.

**Scaffolded Assignment.** Participants also identified scaffolded units where students give the same presentation more than one time and receive feedback in between as valuable. Specifically, participants highlighted the value of getting feedback on formative assignments—in this case their first informative presentation—so that they can make changes for summative assignments that were worth more points—in this case the second time they give their informative presentation. They explained that getting constructive feedback and then having the opportunity to apply it before presenting again was a useful way for instructors to design their course and provide feedback. One participant explained:

A time when I have received helpful/useful feedback was after giving my informative presentation. I got my rubric back with my grade and suggestions on how I would present better. These suggestions really helped me with my performance for my next [informative] speech.

Another participant said:

Receiving feedback during informative presentation one was most helpful because it helped me to really better my second informative speech. I was given constructive feedback to help me better present the information I had, and also reword and restructure my information to better connect to my audience. This feedback has helped me with my other presentations, because I recognize how important it is to connect to the people you speak toward.

Participants found that by applying the feedback they got on their first informative presentation (a formative assignment) they were more successful on their second informative presentation (the summative assignment), ultimately helping them be more successful throughout the remainder of the semester. Additionally, if instructors do not have the capacity to include this assignment format in their course, our participants suggested that even having the opportunity to practice their presentation for their instructor to get feedback was valuable. One participant explained it would be useful to “incorporate more dry run speeches before the speech date so we can practice our speech before an audience and get feedback.” Another said, “instructor feedback is more helpful if you had the opportunity to practice part of your speech for your instructor . . . to get feedback beforehand.” Creating opportunities for students to receive feedback before completing their summative assignment was viewed by participants as a specific way that instructors could provide more useful feedback.

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Through opportunities for learning and scaffolded units that included formative and summative assignments, participants emphasized the value of getting feedback from their instructors throughout the process of preparing for a presentation. They viewed these processes as useful because they were able to make changes and improvements prior to submitting or presenting the major assignment for the unit based on the suggestions made by their instructor.

### ***A Communicative Process***

Finally, when asked how feedback from their instructor could be improved, a number of participants emphasized one-on-one, in-person feedback as a way receiving feedback would be more useful. One participant explained, "I think instructor feedback could be more helpful if we do one on one conferences to talk about our progress." Another said, "instructor feedback could be more useful if we had built-in time where we could meet with a professor one on one so that the feedback resonates better with the student." A third said feedback could be improved by "giving students more opportunities to talk one on one with their instructor." Getting feedback from instructors in person rather than through a learning management system or other form of mediated communication was viewed as allowing instructors to engage in immediacy behaviors which provide the possibility for students to feel more comfortable about getting feedback from their instructors.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how students enrolled in the introductory communication course define useful instructor feedback. Students identified feedback as useful in terms of content characteristics and feedback process. Useful content characteristics are specific, constructive, praiseworthy, and purposive. The feedback process was most useful when it was delivered in an iterative and timely manner.

### **How Students Prefer to Receive Feedback**

This study's findings extend previous literature on instructor feedback. Our participants suggested that useful instructor feedback should be specific and constructive while focusing on how students can improve on their assignment. Further, they suggested that praise was a useful form of feedback when used to identify things a student did well. These findings support previously articulated typologies of feedback (Reynolds et al., 2004; Simonds et al., 2009) and suggestions that when used intentionally praise is an effective form of instructor feedback (Brophy, 1981; Titsworth, 2000). These types of feedback our participants perceived as useful aligned with FIT's (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) key proposition that feedback focusing on the task at hand will lead to more positive outcomes for students and prior research (Dannels et al., 2011). Students identified that broad feedback that did not address specific aspects of their assignment (i.e., meta-task feedback) were not useful to them. Thus, our findings suggest that students' perspectives on useful feedback support FIT's central proposition.

Our examination also extends previous research regarding instructor feedback (Reynolds et al., 2004; Simonds et al., 2009) by exploring when instructors should deliver feedback to make it useful for students. More specifically, students need to receive feedback with enough time to make changes before submitting their next assignment or giving their next presentation. This finding supports Hazel et al. (2011) and King et al.'s (2000) argument that immediate feedback can help improve student performance. Supporting King et al.'s (2000) finding that delayed feedback helped students with the planning aspects of assignments, our participants suggested the written feedback provided after a presentation was useful

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when it was given to students with enough time to apply the feedback on future assignments. This supports Broadbent et al.'s (2018) suggestion that feedback provided on summative assessments should include formative elements as students indicated they used feedback to improve future similar assignments. Furthermore, this implication becomes especially salient in the online teaching/learning environment where the process of interpreting feedback is mediated; so timeliness becomes more important to give students time to process the meanings and respond as needed.

Within the communication discipline, many courses—especially in the introductory communication course—ask students to complete writing and presentational speaking assignments that are unique but also include components (e.g., writing and delivery) that do not change from assignment to assignment. Therefore, instructors should provide feedback that includes characteristics that make it useful, but that it is also provided before students' next assignment is due so they can use the feedback to inform how they approach their next assignment (Bailey, 2009; Small & Attree, 2016). Our findings support the argument that instructors should provide formative feedback on summative assessments in the introductory course and communication discipline at-large (Broadbent et al., 2018).

The limited usefulness of rubrics as a form of feedback was also noted by participants. Simply selecting a point value for each rubric category was not thought of as useful feedback. This point underscores the need to provide written feedback that extends beyond a rubric checklist. Simonds et al. (2009) explained that instructors should use specific language from the rubric to connect student evaluation with their expected performance. Our participants suggested that rubrics should be used not only to set clear and consistent standards for grading but should also be an avenue for providing each student with personalized feedback related to their individual performance in each rubric category (Hadden & Frisby, 2019; Jones-Bodie et al., 2020). Providing constructive comments that offer suggestions for improvement for each rubric category can help students identify the areas of their presentation they should work to improve by providing an approach to doing so that can be easily understood by students (Smith & King, 2004). As rubrics are often used as a way to communicate feedback with students within the communication discipline and introductory communication course, it is important for instructors to note that, as one participant said, “circled numbers on a rubric [are] not useful.” Instead, individualized and specific feedback rather than broad statements or stock comments are useful to students (Hadden & Frisby, 2019; Jones-Bodie et al., 2020).

## **Pedagogical Implications for the Classroom**

Courses should be designed to provide students with a number of opportunities to receive formative feedback that create opportunities for learning and improvement. Our findings suggest three ways instructors could approach providing this feedback in their courses and resulted in the suggestion of three best practices. As the introductory communication course was the context in which we collected data, our examples are set in this context, but could be adapted to a variety of different courses. First, instructors should provide feedback on formative assignments (e.g., preparation outlines) prior to students completing the summative assessments for the unit (e.g., oral presentation). Peer workshops have previously been suggested as an approach to providing students with feedback on formative assignments (Broeckelman-Post & Hosek, 2014). As students perceive instructor feedback to be more valuable than peer feedback (Semlak, 2008), instructors should also provide feedback on students' formative assignments, that is available to students prior to their summative assignment, as an avenue to provide useful formative feedback that students can use to finalize and improve the unit's culminating assignment.

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Second, the first unit of the semester could provide students with the opportunity to complete the same assignment (e.g., informative presentation, first writing assignment) twice with the opportunity to receive and implement suggestions between submissions. This provides a unique opportunity for instructors to give students useful feedback that can be applied by students when they revise and resubmit the assignment. This is valuable because students often get feedback on their work in one format (e.g., an outline) and then apply that feedback to another format (e.g., oral presentation, essay). This process could lead students to misinterpret and ineffectively adapt their instructor's feedback. By scaffolding assignments and providing formative feedback on an assignment that shares the same format as the summative assessment students can directly apply feedback when revising the assignment for the second submission rather than having to adapt feedback from an outline or other formative assignment.

Third, participants discussed the value of getting feedback when meeting with their instructor in an in-person setting. Students valued these interactions because they provided the opportunity for instructors to present feedback to students in a way that resonated with them. In-person feedback meetings also provide the opportunity for instructors to engage in immediacy behaviors that help students feel more comfortable receiving instructor feedback (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). Scholars have previously suggested instructors employ immediacy strategies through written feedback (Gardner et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that providing feedback in-person could provide instructors another avenue to engage in immediacy strategies that help them more effectively communicate feedback to their students. Moreover, holding these meetings early in the semester could help students successfully apply instructor feedback throughout the semester. This finding also provides some support for the usefulness of peer mentoring that students receive in communication centers. When students attend a meeting at the communication center, they have the opportunity to receive feedback in-person (Anderson et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2021). This provides the opportunity to get feedback prior to completing the summative assessment offering alternative methods for students to receive useful formative feedback even if it is not coming directly from their instructor.

Ultimately, our findings and subsequent discussion led to the development of three best practices instructors can use to provide useful feedback. Instructors should provide constructive and specific feedback on each aspect of the assignment being assessed. Instructors should provide feedback on formative assignments, such as outlines, prior to students submitting the summative assessment. While engaging in this practice, instructors should provide students with time-sensitive formative feedback, enabling students to apply that feedback on their summative assignment. Instructors should also provide formative feedback on summative assignments to guide student's improvement on future assignments. This can be done by providing students with specific suggestions on how they can improve on each area being assessed.

## **Practical Implications Beyond the Classroom Context**

As a communicative process, the giving and receiving of feedback occurs in contexts beyond the traditional classroom. We suggest that our findings can be transferred to offer practical implications for training and development programs and manager–employee communication in organizational settings. First, similarly to the scaffolding of assignments in traditional classroom settings, we suggest that when designing training and development programs organizations design programs that include intentional feedback throughout the process. For example, training could be organized into two sessions where skills are taught during session one. Participants then complete activities that apply the skills between

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sessions and receive feedback from the facilitator. Then session two provides the opportunity for specific learning and development to occur guided by the feedback received.

Second, manager–employee relationships often involved the giving and receiving of feedback. Many organizations have formal annual or biannual employee review processes where managers offer feedback to guide employee improvement. However, based on our findings these processes, although valuable, are likely too far removed from when employees completed the task they are being offered feedback on. We suggest that managers give feedback and offer suggestions for improvement throughout the year as mistakes or areas for improvement are identified, rather than only at specific times during the year. This way, employees have the opportunity to address mistakes and improve their performance in a timely manner toward achieving individual and organizational goals.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this study's findings are valuable, they should be considered in light of a few limitations. We were able to get a large number of responses from students but, due to the nature of the online questionnaire, participants' responses lacked depth. We were unable to probe for additional responses or ask clarifying questions. To understand the student perspective further, researchers should use qualitative interviews or focus groups which would provide the opportunity for follow-up and clarifying questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions. Further, this study's participants were asked to focus their responses on feedback received in the introductory communication course. Scholars could extend this research by investigating students' perceptions of feedback in communication courses more broadly or across disciplines. It would also be useful to see if/how students' perceptions of, as well as their expectations for, instructor feedback differ in online environments. This information would be useful as higher education grapples with the transition to virtual teaching and could produce insights that support student learning.

This study focused on what made feedback useful for students but did not ask students how they used feedback. Researchers should explore how students use the feedback they get from their instructor. One approach to this would be to analyze students' reflective essays. An assignment asking them to outline how they applied the feedback they received, how they utilized the feedback from one assignment and applied it to the next, and how the feedback effected that transition would provide the opportunity to gain this insight. In line with this suggestion, scholars should also consider exploring how, if at all, students are taught to interpret the feedback they receive so that they can effectively use it. This study only focused on understanding what made instructor feedback useful. Future research could explore what makes peer feedback or feedback received from communication center visits useful to gain a greater understanding of the usefulness of the variety of feedback students receive in the introductory communication course.

We acknowledge the pedagogical implications suggested based on this study's findings could be labor-intensive for instructors to implement in practice. Therefore, as instructors begin to use these practices when providing feedback, additional research and assessment is needed to further understand how they influence students' experiences in the course, improvement from assignment to assignment, and overall learning and development. For example, scholars could examine student perceptions of their improvement when completing scaffolded speaking assignments; or how, if at all, students use instructor feedback on preparation outlines as they prepare for speaking assignments. These avenues for future

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research would give instructors additional information on the value of the pedagogical practices we suggested and would provide additional insight into the nuanced ways undergraduate students perceive and use instructor feedback.

College courses provide an opportunity for students to develop skills that will help them engage effectively in academic, civic, personal, and professional life. To achieve these outcomes, however, instructors must provide useful feedback. To be useful, content must be specific and purposive, offered in a timely and iterative manner, as well as be both formative and summative. In doing so, students will leave the course and academy equipped with essential lifelong skills.

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