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The importance of feedback in e-learning

Feedback as an opportunity for improvement. Here's why in e-learning it is crucial for both users and creators.

In any work or school environment, **feedback** is a key component. It provides a useful tool to let those involved know whether they are progressing in the right direction and in what areas they can improve. Therefore, even in **e-learning**, feedback represents a valuable opportunity to give and receive guidance and advice, in a mutual exchange between users and creators of online courses.

What is feedback?

The term "feedback" has now become part of our common language, especially in the business environment. Literally, the term comes from two English words: "feed," which means "to nurture," and "back," which as a noun refers to back, but can also be understood as "return, return." The resulting idea is that of someone giving nourishment, then receiving it back. This image renders well the idea of the **reciprocity** of feedback, as a two-way tool that fosters an ongoing exchange between teacher and student (or employer and employee) and vice versa. In Italian, the term "feedback" can be rendered as **feedback**.

In John Hattie and Helen Timperley's publication, ***The Power of Feedback***, three questions are expressed, which effective feedback should answer:

1. Where am I going, so what are the goals set at the beginning and what is the long-term plan.
2. How am I doing?, so what progress is being made to achieve the goals set. In other words, the answer to this question should show the state of learning at the time of feedback, to give the opportunity to correct any mistakes and adjust course.
3. Where to go next, i.e., what steps need to be taken to progress on the course.

Effective feedback, then, should give indications about the progress achieved so far and the steps to be taken to get to the predetermined goals. There are, however, several ways that can be used to provide useful feedback.

The different types

Feedback is neither unique nor one-size-fits-all, but it can be expressed in different ways. Of the various classifications, the most common is the one that identifies positive and negative feedback.

- **Positive** (or confirmatory) **feedback**, which consists of gratification for work done. It is a message of confirmation of the effectiveness of the actions performed up to that point and reinforces the behavior of the worker or student, who realizes that he or she has acted in the correct manner. Positive feedback often serves as a stimulus for improvement and motivation to continue on the right path.
- **Negative feedback**, which coincides with a corrective message with respect to what has been done so far. This type of feedback indicates the failure to achieve the goals and is useful for prompting the student or worker to course correction and to find alternative solutions to the performance of the task, eliminating the negative behaviors that led to the failure.

In addition to these two broad categories, ***Quiddis*** identifies other types of feedback that can be useful in assessment:

- **Descriptive or analytical**, which highlights useful information and makes suggestions for deepening topics where the user's knowledge is less complete. It is a tool that can serve the purpose of performance improvement, prompting the learner to course correction to achieve goals.
- **Evaluative**, which aims to measure the learner's knowledge by highlighting correct and incorrect answers. In this case, feedback does not necessarily imply a push for improvement or the presence of useful suggestions for correction, but

only takes on an evaluative function. It may be useful to use this tool at the beginning of the learning path, to enable the teacher to understand the initial knowledge of his or her students, so as to construct an appropriate training path.

Another distinction can be made between internal or external feedback. The latter consists of feedback given by the teacher to his or her student, while internal feedback coincides with a self-assessment. An alternative, may be peer evaluation, that is, feedback that does not come from the teacher, but from other students or co-workers. In this way, in addition to the evaluative and, if necessary, corrective aspect, socialization and interaction among students also comes into play.

Feedback in e-learning

In e-learning, as in other work and educational settings, receiving feedback is crucial for learners enrolled in **online courses**, because it allows them to improve and correct any errors along the way, enabling the achievement of final goals. In the case of digital learning, the feedback occurs at a distance and, often, does not come from a real, physical person, but from a program or algorithm embedded in the digital system. Sometimes, online platforms may use avatars, to make the process more human, but the result is the same: a message appears on the screen of the device used by the user, providing the learner with feedback on his or her path.

In these cases, it is not always possible to ask for clarification and to go deeper into the topic, although the presence of chats and forums within the online course are a valuable resource in this regard. For a student in a digital course, therefore, receiving feedback is crucial, as in traditional learning, to understand whether the understanding of the different topics is complete or whether it needs to be deepened.

But the feedback given by the course to the student is only one side of the coin. In e-learning, in fact, the feedback given by the user to the course itself is also crucial. In this case, the **student's evaluation** concerns the learning experience, the usability of the platform, communication with the tutor and fellow students, and the content of the program. In this way, those working on the implementation of the digital course can also learn and improve the lessons. It is a mutual exchange between students and teachers and creators of e-learning courses: on the one hand, the platform provides feedback to users, so they can understand their progress and improve, while on the other hand, students evaluate the course, so those who designed it can check its effectiveness.

Why give feedback?

But why is it so important to give feedback to the student about what they are learning? There are **four main benefits** of effective feedback:

1. It helps to **improve**. Feedback from the teacher or digital system allows the student to check his or her skills and level of learning. In the case of negative feedback, the user can correct his or her course of action and veer toward a more productive and effective pattern of action to achieve his or her goal. The purpose of feedback, in fact, is not to criticize a shortcoming or a performance below expectations. On the contrary, it can be a useful tool in raising one's level of learning.
2. It increases **motivation**, especially in the case of positive feedback. When the user's way of operating is found to be effective, this is recognized and his learning strategy is reinforced, prompting him to proceed in the same direction. If the teacher shows appreciation for the efforts made, pupils often feel driven to improve. In this way, feedback becomes a useful tool to increase users' motivation to achieve their goals and the success of the course.
3. It helps to measure **progress** and be accountable for achievements. Feedback also represents an evaluation of what has been learned up to that point, allowing the student to measure his or her own progress and, consequently, to decide whether to continue along the training path taken or whether something needs to be changed.
4. It contributes to **learning**, because it allows the student to measure his or her knowledge and, if necessary, to review the fundamental concepts of his or her course.

In general, designers of an e-learning course use two distinct times to carry out student-facing feedback: immediate or delayed. In the former case, the user receives feedback as soon as he or she takes an action on the platform, while in the latter case, the system has feedback sections set up after a certain period of time.

Why collect feedback?

For users, therefore, it is crucial to receive feedback from the platform in order to understand how effectively the learning is working and whether or not it is achieving its goals. This allows them to realize the effectiveness of the strategy used and, if necessary, to provide for its correction. But, in the field of e-learning, the other side of the coin is also very important: in addition to giving feedback, the course creator must also **receive** it.

A user's opinion on the progress of the online course is valuable for the lesson planner and also for the platform creator. The feedback, in fact, concerns both the functioning of system functions and the learning itself and the understanding of individual lessons. This kind of feedback has a twofold advantage: on the one hand, the correr feels more involved in the creator's choices and decisions; on the other hand, the organizer can get to know his students and users of the platform better and, if necessary, improve its structure and organization.

As already explained, **feedback from the trainees**, can take place at three different chronological moment:

1. **Before the course begins**, so as to get to know users' expectations right away and act to meet them in the best possible way.
2. **During the course**, to make user participation more active.
3. **At the end of the course**, to get a full judgment of whether the course was successful or not.

The importance of feedback that allows the recipient to understand whether he or she is proceeding in the right direction is crucial in any field of work or study. This, in fact, is one of the most effective tools for consciously achieving one's goals. "We all need people to give us adequate feedback-said Bill Gates- It is the only way we can improve."