

Facilitation and response



Inspiration and contemplation

This article is a adaptation of an article originally printed in the Facilitator Manual for LaererIKT, the Norwegian version of the Pedagogical ICT Licence.

The objective of this article is to offer facilitators input on the 'art of response'.

In the article you will find elaboration and inspiration on how to offer constructive response to module assignments in eTeacher 2.0.

The objective of giving response

You give participants response to enable them to develop both their pedagogical/didactical competencies and their ICT-skills.

Constructive feedback

Show consideration for the participants

When you write response, you must show consideration for the participants.

If you receive a draft assignment from a team that seems to be very self-confident and to be very competent in the subject area, you can challenge the team more in the response than if the text expresses uncertainty about the subject matter. You can expect a number of participants in the latter category – but that does not mean that they should not be challenged. However, the level of the challenge must fit the receiver of it and be adjusted to the focus you choose. And remember that one of the limitations of electronic moderation is that part of the message is lost through the lack of gesticulation, facial expression etc.

Consideration

To show consideration for the participants does not mean that you should give them dishonest or blurred feedback, but that you are careful how you write your response. When you formulate a considerate response, the receivers will see that you wish to assist them and that you are not 'out to kill'. This can make the difference between giving the team the motivation to further improve their assignment and with your response complete removing any urge they might have had to complete the assignment.

There are many ways in which to show consideration. The most basic element probably is showing compassion with the participants in your response. Receiving a rather critical feedback is much easier if the critic expresses an understanding for the situation the team is in and expresses a willingness to recognize positive elements in what is less brilliant.

Another way to show consideration can be to express the fact that parts of your assessment is subjective and that other facilitators might see things differently. This can be done by using expressions like 'the way I see it', 'in my opinion' and 'in my experience'.

A warm, informal and oral writing style can seem gentler than a distancing, formal and solely assessing style. Use smileys, humor and explicit irony to better sell the message.

Below is an illustration of the contrast between response with low and large focus on showing consideration for the participants:

Example 1A	Low consideration
	I find your assignment too narrow. Your language is unclear and far too extensive.

What is your plan for putting this learning scenario into practice?

The assignment shows lack of adequate work and layout decisions which make it even more difficult to understand.

Example 1B

High consideration

The learning scenario that you describe is very ambitious. You mention a number of objectives you wish to meet and a number of activities you want to initiate as part of the project. This shows that you want to stretch far in your work and you want action – something I find very positive. I will, however, ask you to consider whether the scope of the assignment is too ambitious and too large (see more concrete comments to this later in the response).

Reading this I get the impression that you find yourselves in a thought process that is new to several of you – which you also mention in the draft.

The most important point that I want you to focus on when finishing the assignment is the structure of it. Reading it I find it difficult to see your exact plans for the scenario – which activities and in which order?

You might consider numbering the activities you plan to initiate. You might try to think of it this way; imagine that your description will be given to a colleague who need step-by-step instructions in what to do. Or that the description should be published on the Internet and the reader has no opportunity to ask you questions.

Example B focuses on enlarging a positive aspect of the assignment without leaving out the critical feedback. This can be an important strategy towards showing consideration for the participants.

Below we will focus on how to emphasize positive points in a response.

Emphasize positive elements

Key words in the response are learning and development, and often it will be of equal importance for participants to have positive elements pointed out as to have the negative elements identified.

Often there seems to exist a common understanding that all that is not mentioned in a response is positive. This, however, is not a very constructive approach. Often it is equally important to have confirmed what is positive.

In addition to this it is important to emphasize the positive elements even when the assignment is far from the target. When emphasizing the positive sides, it is much easier to express the more problematic and negative areas.

When beginning your response by pointing out a number of positive elements, it will have a positive ring and as a consequence bringing critical remarks later seems less bombastic.

This, however, does not mean that you should write something that you do mean. In that case your credibility is at stake and subsequent comments and questions will be seen in this

light.

The example below compares a response, which singularly expresses the negative aspects of the assignment, and a more balanced response where the point of departure is taken from the positive aspects.

Example 2A	Only focusing on the negative aspects
<p>I have read your draft, which contains substantial weaknesses. You write very little on how you plan to utilize and integrate ICT in the learning process. You write, for instance, that students have little knowledge of word processing, but you do not describe which consequences this must have for the planning of your learning scenario.</p> <p>You actually write very little about the role of the teacher in your draft. In addition to this the style is rather messy and the text is almost impossible to understand.</p>	

Example 2B	Emphasizing positive aspects
<p>I have received your draft. And my first thought was that you clearly show that you master the ICT-skills part of the assignment.</p> <p>You meet all ICT skills requirements of the assignment. I particularly appreciate the creative use of text boxes. In my opinion that is very good.</p> <p>When reading the text I see that you describe a series of relevant activities that can be included in a learning scenario of teaching students how to use the computer for text writing.</p> <p>However, reading it I find it difficult to see the sequence of these activities, and which phases you will divide the writing process into (this is required by the assignment). I also think that you could write something about the concrete role of the teacher in each of these phases.</p>	

Challenge the team

On the one hand it is important that the facilitator supports the participants through expressing consideration and through emphasizing positive aspects. On the other hand you must stimulate the team to develop further than they would have been able to on their own.

To make this happen you must challenge the team while supporting them at the same time. You might for instance challenge the team in relation to important aspects they have not included in their draft assignment, point to an important perspective they have not seen, point to unclear passages, question the realism in carrying through the learning scenario as described or refer to contradictions in the text.

However, you need to carefully consider both the number of challenges you give the team and the way you formulate them.

Challenge within reason

In literature about coaching you are always recommended to seek a balance between support and challenge.

Response that only focuses on support can easily seem toothless and does not offer the best grounds for learning. At the same time feedback with a strong overweight of challenge can be seen as too demanding and even overwhelming and negative. When formulating challenge, you must clearly distinguish between challenge formulated as absolute demands to the assignment and challenges that invite the team to reflect beyond the absolute demands of the assignment. Besides, challenges that are formulated as supportive feedback work much better than challenges formulated as devastating criticism.

Example 3	Supportive and challenging response
<p>You write to me in the e-mail that you have been under severe pressure in the school lately and that as a consequence you have not put as much effort into this assignment as planned.</p> <p>I can see that you could have put more time into the assignment but I have no problem understanding how everyday life in the school can be. I would turn things around and applaud you for trying to make an assignment despite the time pressure!</p> <p>As you imply yourself I cannot approve the assignment in its present form. However, I think that you have a solid basis for a final assignment.</p> <p>To obtain an approval in this assignment you must first and foremost take a closer look at the words in the assignment. It demands that you describe the role of the teacher in the various phases of the writing process. In my opinion this part of your assignment needs more work. The way I read your assignment the teacher is almost invisible in the description of the scenario, although your description of the students' learning processes is quite good. How must the teacher relate to the learning process of the students? What must the teacher do exactly? When must the teacher do this? Why must the teacher do this? Etc.</p> <p>In addition to this I believe that it would improve the assignment if you generally argue better for your choices. For instance you write that the students must use PowerPoint in their presentation – what is the objective of this? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this choice?</p>	

Make the response as specific and concrete as possible

A typical weakness of response is that your statements are general such as "you did well", "this was a good draft", or "the assignment has severe weaknesses".

If such comments are not made concrete through much more specific feedback, they are of limited value. Often such singularly general assessment can leave the reader with the impression that the quality of the facilitation is bad. It is especially important to be aware of this in written response where the team cannot – as opposed to face-to-face meetings – ask the facilitator to elaborate on specific points.

Below you will see examples of general and more specific response:

Example 4A	Too general response
The learning scenario is interesting.	

Example 4B	Specific response
The learning scenario is interesting and I find two elements particularly good. The first one is the way you adjust the activities to the students' level, this I find well thought and well argued. Secondly I find the use of word processing in a project where students engage in a role-play as journalists in a newsroom a creative and exciting way to introduce word processing. Your description of the concrete tasks as teacher or "editor" in the different phases of the writing is clear and good.	

Focus on things the team can actually do something about

Response is not worth much if the team cannot really change what is singled out as weaknesses. For instance a team with reading or writing difficulties will have limited benefit from a response that states that a number of typing errors disturb the reading of the assignment. This response is more likely to limit the motivation for completing the assignment. In the same way it might prove unconstructive to emphasize the wonderful potential of ICT if the context of the team in terms of competence or hardware is miles from what you advise the team to do or use.

Example 5A

Focus on things the team cannot do much about

You might consider getting hold of computers with larger capacity to make this learning scenario work. I am pretty sure that it will not work in the present context. If you had more contemporary hardware, you were more likely to harvest the benefits of using ICT in the projects you describe – especially when it comes to video editing.

Example 5B

Focus on things the team can actually change

You mention that the hardware available to you is a problem in relation to realizing the learning scenario you describe.

If it is not possible to get better computers, you might want to reconsider how you can design the learning scenario to be flexible enough to be realized with less contemporary computers. I focus here especially on the weight you put on the use of video.

Would it be possible for the students to use still pictures? Might the use of computers be combined with non-digital video sequences so that the video can be played on a VHS machine and not on the computer? Can you organize the work in a way that all groups do part of the work on a powerful computer while other parts of the work is done on old computers? Can you think of other solutions?

Be as descriptive as possible

Negative response will most often arouse defense mechanism in the team. This is particularly undesirable in the sense that it will diminish the reflection about the response in the team and make the team less aware of what the facilitator is actually saying.

One way to prevent this is to make the response as descriptive as possible. This means that the facilitator will describe as accurately as possible what he/she has read. After this it is easier to conclude with a critical assessment. Such a “working your way towards the criticism” will probably arouse far fewer defense mechanisms among other things because the negative response is thoroughly explained and put in perspective.

In face-to-face facilitation the objective might be to ask the questions needed for the student to discover the weak points himself and ask the critical questions to his/her own work. This might work in an electronic conference, but it severely lacks the opportunity “to guide the way” through a lack of questions!

Below you will see examples of two ways of response:

Example 6A

Response without description

I miss reflection on the pedagogical use of ICT in the various phases.

Example 6B

Descriptive response

Your draft primarily describes how the students will use ICT. Of the four phases you describe you have only reflected on the pedagogical aspects of using ICT in the brainstorming phase. In this phase you write about the advantages and disadvantages of using word processing.

Here the response can be concluded with a question or a summary angle:

1. Would it not be fair to expect you to evaluate this for the other phases?
2. To sum up: I believe that it would immensely improve your assignment if you add something about your reflections on the pedagogical use of ICT in the various phases.

Be open and wonder

In connection with the ideal of being descriptive, facilitators should be relatively open and wonder about different ways in which to understand the assignment.

This will offer a far better point of departure for reflection and dialogue in the team than expressions of fixed points of view. People see this or situations differently and a very important element in the response is an open approach – think of response as a dialogue.

Parallel to this it is important that you do not narrow the response down to issues you personally find most interesting. If you in your job as a facilitator succeed in applying the ideas above, your response is much more likely to evoke activity and learning in the team.

Example 7A	Closed response
Overall I believe that you will encounter difficulties in this project. I think that you need to consider the use of mail groups.	

Such a response is primarily locked and does not invite participants to further develop the learning scenario. After a response like this they are more likely to discard the idea completely. In the very few situations where the team has actually painted itself into a corner, the strategy above may be the only solution, but in almost all other cases an open invitation to enter into a dialogue is much more constructive.

Example 7B	More open approach
Overall I feel some doubts that this project can be realized the way you describe it. However, you may know of preconditions you do not explain in your assignment?	
In any case I will ask you to consider the following questions:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent will students with different competencies have the time to learn how to use the advanced word processing functions you mention? Time seems short? • Is it possible to differentiate how advanced functions each student will use? 	

How might this be done?

If you still mean that it is realistic to teach students these very advanced functions: how exactly do you plan to do this?

Offer suggestions or advice when it is reasonable

Facilitators are often warned against giving advice. Some facilitators make an absolute rule of this and from sheer principle never give advice. The reason for this might be that by giving advice the facilitator risk being perceived as a “know-it-all” while in fact the team often knows much more about the subject-specific situation in question than the facilitator. The consequence of giving advice might be that the team finds that the facilitator lacks understanding of them and the situation and that he does not trust the team to assess the situation themselves. The result might be that the team either rejects advice or leaves the initiative completely to the facilitator and fails to trust their own judgment.

Still an absolute refusal of giving advice is not the best strategy in all contexts. In many situations a piece of advice can be beneficial to a team that is deadlocked and insecure. Sometimes a draft is so far from what you might reasonably expect that you need to give concrete advice to help the team ashore. Here the facilitator must contribute with experience and offer ideas and possibilities. If you, during your job as a facilitator, get an interesting and brilliant idea in while working with a team that is up for the challenge – then by all means pass on the idea. However, when you do give advice, you need to be aware of how you do it.

When and how to offer advice?

In some cases you can make the team aware of ideas and alternatives they had not thought of themselves and thus stimulate their thinking. When giving advice be sure to phrase it carefully. Avoid giving advice that is too absolute unless the team is in danger of writing an assignment that cannot otherwise be approved.

The participant should be able to see your advice as well-meant input to their process. Advice is best when functioning as a supplement to the reflection in the team and when the team is open to these supplements. In any case you should limit the advice. Research shows that the more advice you give when facilitating, the less advice is taken – and contrary. The difference between more or less forceful pieces of advice is illustrated below:

Example 8A

Thrust advice

You have to put more effort into teaching the students to use the software.

Example 8B

Less thrust advice

I have seen examples of learning scenarios where the time attributed to teaching the students concrete ICT skills in the software tool was too small. This causes frustration and harms motivation in several groups.

More particularly you risk that a number of students fall completely behind compared to the other students. A useful approach that I have used myself is to let the more skilled students participate in the training of the less skilled students. Perhaps this was an idea in your scenario?

Advice can often be wrapped into a question if you are afraid to seem condescending. For example, “Could mind-mapping be a relevant tool to illustrate a long-term process like the one you describe?”

Stimulate reflection and dialogue in the team

Above it has been pointed out several times that a key objective of the response is to stimulate the team to reflection and dialogue. This can be done through comments like:

Example 9

Direct invitation to reflection in the team

I expect you to discuss the questions I raised in the team. Do you agree with the conclusions?

I hope that the comments contribute to a fruitful discussion and look forward to receiving the finished assignment from you.

Questions may be the most powerful tool available to you to stimulate reflection. As a consequence we will further investigate how you can use different types of questions to stimulate reflection.

The table below illustrates a number of useful question types that may promote reflections of the pedagogical use of ICT:

Types of questions	The function of the question
<p>Expanding questions</p> <p>Questions that invite description</p> <p>Can you expand a little bit on this aspect?</p> <p>Which other relevant characteristics does the learning scenario have?</p> <p>Question that invites the team to see things from a different perspective</p> <p>How do you think that students with different competencies see this?</p> <p>How will parents receive a controversial approach like the one you describe here?</p> <p>What are the advantages and disadvantages of the learning scenario from a motivational point of view?</p> <p>What are the possibilities and limitations to the learning scenario given the context you are in?</p> <p>To which degree with this method meet the objectives of your teaching?</p>	<p>Stimulates the team to extended reflection and more complete answers.</p>
<p>Circular questions</p> <p>Questions that explore differences</p> <p>Which students will be more motivated for this type of teaching? And which students would be least motivated?</p> <p>To which degree do you expect gender differences in this connection?</p> <p>Impact questions</p> <p>What is most decisive for student motivation in this case?</p> <p>How will it affect students that they will be using a different word processor from the one they have at home?</p> <p>Hypothetical question</p> <p>How would it affect the learning of your students, if you decided not to use the Internet?</p>	<p>Stimulates the participants to reflect on how various preconditions in the context interact and influence each other.</p>
<p>Clarifying question</p>	

<p>You state that allowing the students free access to the Internet will not do. Does this go for all students and all situations? Or are there exceptions? If yes, what is characteristic of these situations?</p>	<p>Helps teachers to communicate and think more concretely.</p>
<p>Question that focuses on the strong side of the team</p> <p>It seems as if you have a firm grasp of the use of spreadsheets. How do you see this tool used in other subjects and other contexts?</p>	<p>Builds team self-confidence in the pedagogical use of ICT.</p>

Litterature and links

Lauvås, P., Handal G. (97) *Vejledning og Praktisk Fagteori*. Klim (*Facilitation and applied subject teory*)

Schön, D.A. (83). *The reflective Practitioner*. Avebury. Ashgate Publishing Limited, Great Britain

Thomas Harboe, *Brug din vejleder. (Use your facilitator)*

http://www.daimi.au.dk/~tine/flexnet/metro_all/skriv_uniopgaver/vejlederbrug.htm