

Feedback

What is feedback?

Feedback is essential to learning and to sound assessment practice. Whilst assessment has been described as the engine driving learning, according to Brown (2007) feedback is "...the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding" (p. 1).

Feedback allows students not only to understand how they performed on the assessment task and justification for their grades, but also importantly it provides guidance for students to build their capacity as a learner. As Nichol (2007) sees it, the focus of this self-regulatory or empowerment style of feedback targets "...how students learn to monitor, manage and take responsibility for their own learning" (p. 4).

Feedback is not simply the correction of errors, awarding a mark/grade or the writing of a single word comment (e.g. "shows promise") or a negative equivalent (e.g. "poor effort"), neither is it editorial or grammatical corrections. In the latter instance students should be informed when the literacy of their submitted work does not meet expected standards; in some case it may need to be returned for attention prior to marking and/or the student advised to seek remedial help from the Learning Centre. The academic may choose to make several annotations against substandard practice to serve to illustrate the issue, but are not expected to correct the work.

Meaningful feedback is rigorous. Gibbs and Simpson (2004/5) claim feedback can "correct errors, develop understanding through explanations, generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks, promote the development of generic skills by focusing on evidence of the use of skills rather than on the content, promote meta-cognition by encouraging students' reflection and awareness of learning processes involved in the assignment and encourage students to continue studying" (pp. 20-21). The feedback can be either summative, where it provides an explanation for the grades, or formative feed-forward comments to assist students in critiquing their learning to inform subsequent work.

Characteristics of feedback

The challenge is to provide feedback that students can access, understand and use to inform their studies and future performances. To achieve this Boud and associates (2010) claim feedback should be:

- *Informative and supportive to encourage positivity towards learning;*
- *Timely, allowing feedback to be used to inform other learning and work;*
- *Frequent and specific enough to guide students learning and work.*

There are several key characteristics to bear in mind when thinking about your feedback practices. The advice in this section is influenced by the works of Gibbs and Simpson (2004/5), Race (2010), and Race and Pickford (2007).

Informative and supportive

The tone of voice or the words you use can support or unintentionally devastate a student. A student who has put some effort into their work can be de-motivated by statements like "your work is weak". Instead try to pitch the message differently, for example "your argument could be strengthened if you had considered" Likewise some words or abbreviations you use may have limited meaning to a student. For example, the words "link here" and a cross mark etched on the work (especially in red) does not provide understanding and clarity about what is required to improve the work. Consider couching your comment in terms of what students might do to improve their performance. Remember the strong student needs feedback too. Stating "excellent" on a student's work says little about why it is of high standard. Consequently if the next piece of work is "good" they may not understand why it was not awarded excellent again. Instead try to provide some indication around why it is worthy of being marked as excellent.

Principle 5: Assessment provides high quality and timely feedback to students.

Requirement 3.7.1

Feedback forms a critical part of the learning process. . . . Feedback should aim to be analytical, constructive and empowering. High quality feedback will support development and will do more than simply justify the mark given.

Requirement 3.3.1

Feedback appropriate to each assessment should provide developmental support to students learning.

Gibbs and Simpson (2005) emphasise how providing students with a grade with little formative feedback can be destructive and instead recommend providing feedback that tells the students exactly where they struggled and possible strategies to overcome weaknesses. Feedback of this nature can significantly improve the value that learners place on the feedback, especially if it aligns with the learning outcomes for the unit or course so that students can see its value. Specifically, if feedback is intended to strengthen learning and support improvements in future assessment tasks it needs to provide appropriate direction on which the learner can plan their own remedial action.

Timely

There is a strong evidence base for providing feedback as soon as possible whilst the task is still fresh in the student's mind. Some marking approaches can give relatively instantaneous feedback. For example computerised objective testing can reveal the correct option and supply built in feedback comments as to why distracters are not suitable responses. However, most other forms of assessments cannot be so speedily attended to. Prompt provision of feedback is challenging in a climate of rising student numbers and shortened study periods (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/5).

Frequent and specific

sufficient quantity of feedback is necessary to guide students to improve their learning practices. As Gibbs and Simpson (2005) flag one piece of feedback provided three quarters of the way through a unit of study is hardly likely to influence student's learning and subsequent performance on tasks. Far better to structure assessments tasks so feedback can be provided earlier in the course of study allowing students the opportunity to improve on their performance.

The distribution of generic feedback on feedback sheets, via Blackboard discussion boards or emails is very useful but depersonalised. Plan to supplement this with individualised feedback to make explicit the ownership of the feedback and to assist students to reflect on how they are learning and how they can make improvements.

Manageable

One further consideration for the academic is how to keep the feedback process manageable. It takes time to mark and provide quality feedback. The balance between efficiency and effectiveness in marking and providing feedback is challenging. Race (2010) discusses balancing learning payoff and efficiency and his work in this area is well worth looking at. First review the assessments themselves to determine if they could be approached differently whilst still achieving the same purpose; for example, substitute a 2000 word paper for a 200 to 500 word synthesis/critique. Once this is done consider the following approaches to feedback:

- Incorporate self or peer review.
- Provide generic feedback in small group situations or to whole of group in a lecture theatre setting. You can address the common issues arising from the assessment avoiding the need to write the same feedback on every student's work.
- Standardise repetitive tasks, e.g. have the same criteria for written work.
- Provide model answers and include comments on common difficulties/errors. If these errors are numbered you can use the numbers on the student work and link them to the model answer and your commentary.
- Consider electronic feedback:
 - Provide generic feedback in email or discussion board message,
 - Use electronic repository of typical feedback comments, you can extract the statement to insert in an electronic version of the student's work or number them and write the number on the student's work. You provide the students with the numbered feedback repository so they can link their feedback.
 - Develop electronic rubrics/marketing guides,
 - Develop electronic quizzes, which can provide instant feedback.

Types of feedback

There are various ways in which feedback can be provided; consider using a mix of approaches to meet students' needs and to best suit the assessment task. There are advantages and disadvantages to each, for example written feedback can be individualised and reviewed

Requirement 3.3.8

Design of assessment within a unit will ensure that students receive feedback at an early stage as appropriate to the course, unit and mode of study.

Requirement 3.7.2

Students should receive marks, assignments and feedback as soon as practicable, to maximise their opportunity to improve their performance. Research consistently highlights the significant loss of impact to learning when feedback to students is delayed. Ideally, feedback to students for items other than a final examination will be provided under normal circumstances within **15 working days** and no later than **20 working days**.

Requirement 3.7.3

Feedback that is used to directly support a future assessment task must be returned in sufficient time for it to provide an effective contribution to the subsequent task.

repeatedly, but it takes time to do, may not always be legible. Race (2010) provides a useful synthesis of the pros and cons of the various forms of feedback that is worth a look.

- **Written format**
Feedback can be in a written format, provided direct onto a hard copy of an assignment or annotated digitally using specialised marking software. It can also be provided in the form of summary sheets, exemplar model answers etc.
- **Oral feedback**
Opportunities to provide oral feedback can occur with individuals or groups. It may be face-to-face or through digital conferencing (e.g. *lluminate Live*) or voice over the Internet software (e.g. *Skype*). Providing specific feedback to an individual or generic feedback during class is especially useful if it occurs when class size is small enough to allow dialogue around the feedback.

Strategies to gain feedback from the student and their peers are also useful.

- **Self review**
Race (2010) suggests getting students to reflect on the strengths and opportunities evident in their work. The marker can take this into account and provide feedback on these aspects, which specifically targets students' thinking on their own learning.
- **Peer review**
Peer review involves students judging other students work. One way that this can be done is to arrange for students to blind 'mark' the work of three other students. The aim is for students to provide formative feedback based on the marking criteria. As Race (2010) indicates this approach is powerful because it supports students to learn from the process by gaining insight into the approaches used by others. Students are able to put their work into context by reviewing other work that may be weaker or stronger than their own and based on this recognise how future work could be improved. Peer review can be used in the assessment of oral presentations, whereby students can quickly provide feedback on a rubric style feedback sheet. Mark allocation from peers during this process is more complicated and requires careful planning to make it work. The *Assessment Futures* site provides some useful resources for peer feedback.

Digital feedback

A range of digital technologies are now available to assist the marking process; many of which have been shown to improve marking efficiency and effectiveness of feedback. These include:

- Text editing tools, which are in common use and include such programs as *Microsoft Word* track change and drawing facility, and PDF text editing tools such as *ADOBE* and *ReMarksPDF*.
- Computer assisted testing, for example Blackboard has inbuilt electronic quiz features.
- Audio/video capture tools are becoming increasingly popular and include *Audacity* audio recording and *Echo 360* for screen casts and recorded narration. Feedback comments are recorded by the marker and the recorded file returned to the student with their assessment. This type of feedback is capable of providing plenty of individualised feedback in a relatively quick time period.
- Cloud-based technologies, such as *Google Docs* and *Microsoft Live*, are emerging and their full potential is yet to be realised.
- Peer assessment tools, such as *SparkPLUS*.

Engaging students in the feedback process

Academics commonly exclaim "I spend all that time marking and yet students never bother to collect their marked assessments" and "students aren't interested in what I have written, they only want to know their mark"! So what is happening here? The kind of the feedback and the way in which you provide it can influence what students do with it. If you have spent time providing summative feedback, pointing out what was good or bad about the marked work they may be less inclined to learn from the feedback, especially if the feedback arrives weeks after it was submitted and the student's interest has waned.

Students need to see the value of feedback and attending to it to make changes to their learning and work as required. But how can this be achieved? Engaging feedback strategies should be planned for at the time when assessments are set and several leaders in the field of assessment pedagogy have provide information on how this can be achieved (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004/5;

Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2007; Race 2010; Race & Pickford, 2007). The following list is drawn from the works of these experts.

Tips for engaging students

- Ensure feedback comments are not just backward looking explaining why the grade was awarded but also include a plentiful supply of forward feedback as well.
- Make feedback timely, so the relevance is still seen as pertinent to the student, see earlier section.
- Plan for reflection, Race (2010) suggests if this is an ongoing activity it will make students increasingly aware of how to improve their learning and thus more ready to engage with feedback. For example:
 - Return marked work with feedback comments only, i.e. excluding the grade. Ask students to reflect on the feedback comments and based on this estimate their grade prior to receipt of the awarded grade.
 - Ask students to reflect on your feedback and respond to it. For example, the assignment task may include the requirement for a 100-200 word response to the feedback. They may be asked to reflect on what were the most successful and weakest parts of the assignment, on the basis of having now read your feedback. Or request students to complete a range of sentences such as: “the part of the feedback that I was unsure about was...” and “the comment that was most relevant to me was...”. The responses provided could be graded.
 - Require students to reflect on feedback and prepare a short action plan addressing how they can make improvements in future work.
- Structure the assessment task(s) in development stages. For example:
 - Set up the task in two parts. Formative feedback is provided to part 1. Part 2 is then prepared accounting for the formative feedback and a summative mark provided.
 - Include a draft form of the task to which formative feedback is provided. Students act on the formative feedback in preparing the final submission.
 - Design a series of assessment tasks requiring students to build upon earlier work. For example, ask students to submit with subsequent tasks how they have attended to earlier feedback.
 - Provide samples of previously used assessments, with marking and feedback annotations included. Ask student groups to consider the marking and the justification for the mark awarded. This helps students to be more analytical about their work and better understand constructive criticism.
- Include opportunities for peer review, see earlier section.
- Plan to have conversations about the assessment and feedback. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2007) recommend avoiding the information transmission model of feedback where comments are provided without scope for further dialogue. Encourage discourse by:
 - Arranging in-class break-out discussion groups to discuss marking rubrics/guides and generic feedback comments.
 - Using in-call technologies, such as response clickers, to gauge student’s thinking.

Improve students’ satisfaction with feedback

The benchmarking tools used to assess students’ opinions of teaching, invariably ask students to rate feedback. For example the Course Experience Questionnaire asks:

*The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work and
The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going.*

Whilst in the University’s eVALUate instrument, the unit survey includes:

*Feedback on my work in this unit helps me to achieve the learning outcomes,
and this in the Teaching survey:*

*The teacher provides useful feedback (The teacher provides timely and helpful feedback so
you can learn).*

If you take into account some of the characteristics of effective feedback and the suggestions to get students engaged in the feedback process that were discussed earlier students will most likely be more receptive and satisfied with feedback processes. In addition, make students aware

that you have taken the time to comment on their work and are providing them with feedback. Often students do not have the same understanding of what constitutes feedback as we do.

Also try other strategies, such as:

- Renaming your marking rubrics/guidelines as 'Feedback sheet', 'Feedback Rubric' etc.
- When communicating feedback to students in class or on Blackboard, start by saying "Here is some overall feedback on the last assignment ..."
- On the unit Blackboard site set up an icon or tab for feedback and post generic feedback comments under it.
- Share the top 10 and bottom 10 feedback comments by posting on Blackboard (under the feedback icon).

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