6. PROVIDING FEEDBACK WHICH ENCOURAGES LEARNING

Succinct, meaningful feedback is essential to learning and to sound assessment practice. Feedback that promotes learning can take many forms and you are encouraged to research and discuss with colleagues which type of feedback is most suited to your discipline area while addressing the learning outcomes and relevant assessment tasks. This material draws heavily on Professor Phil Race's *Making Learning Happen* which is highly recommended (see recommended further reading on page 47). Feedback is most effective when it is:

- *Timely***:** the sooner the better: There has been plenty of research into how long after the learning event it takes for the effects of feedback to be significantly eroded. Ideally feedback should be received within a day or two, and even better almost straightaway, as is possible (for example) in some computer-aided or online learning situations, and equally in some face-to-face contexts. A well-chosen task (such as a simulation) may even give immediate feedback in real time within the task itself.

- *Personalised:* Feedback needs to fit each student's achievement, individual nature, and personality. Global ways of compiling and distributing generic feedback can reduce the extent of ownership which students take over the feedback they receive, even when the quality and amount of feedback is increased.

- *Empowering***:** If feedback is intended to strengthen and consolidate learning, we need to make sure it does not have the opposite effect. This is easier to ensure when feedback is positive, of course, but we need to look carefully at how best we can make critical feedback equally empowering for all learners. We must not forget that often feedback is given and received in a system where power is loaded towards the provider of the feedback rather than the recipient.

- *Designed to open doors, not close them:* In this respect, we have to be particularly careful with the words we use when giving feedback to students. Clearly, words with such 'final language' implications as 'weak' or 'poor' can cause irretrievable breakdowns in the communication between assessor and student. Consider couching your suggestions in terms of what students might do to improve their performance.

- *Analytical***:** Analytical feedback unpicks the dimensions of performance and explains why they are praiseworthy or otherwise. Even positive words such as 'excellent' can cause problems. Why was it excellent? For example, if feedback on the next piece of work is only 'very good' - why wasn't it excellent again? In all such cases it is better to praise exactly what was very good or excellent in a little more detail, rather than take the short cut of just using the adjectives themselves.

- *Constructive:* Feedback that gives guidance to students on areas to improve for future tasks can significantly improve the value that learners place on the feedback. Too often, feedback is limited to the specifics of the task. Effective feedback uses the specific issues to highlight general points for the future – this is a key issue if students are to value feedback.

- *Manageable:* There are two sides to this. From our point of view, designing and delivering feedback to students could easily consume all the time and energy we have - it is an endless task. But also from the students' point of view, getting too much feedback can result in them not being able to sort out the important feedback from the routine feedback, reducing their opportunity to benefit from the feedback they need most. You

might like to include feedback suggesting that "the most important thing you need to do for the future is…" On this note, repeated comments about spelling and grammar may inadvertently send the message to learners that this is the most important issue in their work.

In his book, *Making Learning Happen*[1], Phil Race says balancing learning payoff and efficiency is a key aspect of feedback: the most useful forms of feedback are those which, firstly, help students to learn most effectively; and secondly, help teachers to work most efficiently. Feedback methods with higher 'payoff', Figure 13, for both teachers and students are:

Figure 13 Higher 'payoff' feedback methods

• self-assessment	• verbal feedback to small groups
• students comparing work	• e-learning with instant feedback
• individual learning development plans	• group peer review
• peer-marking with feedback	• sharing model answers
• constructive questioning within groups	• small group tutorials
• presentations by students	• assessing against learning outcomes
• verbal feedback to individuals	• one-to-many email
• verbal feedback to whole class	• criterion based written feedback
	• comments on written work

Far less effective feedback methods are giving a mark only, writing a single word comment, negative comments, publishing marks or grades, no feedback at all (as happens with most exams).

Maximising learning payoff through formative feedback

- Provide learners with a list of feedback comments given to a similar assignment or essay prior to them submitting their own. You can then ask learners, for example in a large-group session, to attempt to work out what kind of marks an essay with these kinds of comments might be awarded. This helps them to see the links between feedback comments and levels of achievement, and can encourage them to be more receptive to constructive but critical comments on their own future work.

- Give learners pre-feedback comments. For example, send learners an email containing the comments that you have put on their assignment and ask them to give you a response. You could include in your email a set of statements to use in response to your feedback, designed so that learners could delete from the set as appropriate, or add their own responses to them, to make the task of responding to your feedback as easy as possible.

- Let learners have feedback comments on their assignments prior to them receiving the actual mark. Encourage them to use the feedback comments to estimate what kind of mark they will receive. This could be then used as the basis of an individual or group dialogue on how marks or grades are worked out.

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[1] Race, P. (2005). *Making learning happen: a guide for post-compulsory education*. London: Sage Publications

- Focus your comments on learners' work, not on their personalities. Comments need therefore to be about 'your work', rather than 'you'. This is particularly important when feedback is critical.

- Get learners to look back positively after receiving your feedback. For example, ask them to revisit their work and identify what were their most successful parts of the assignment, on the basis of having now read your feedback. Sometimes learners are so busy reading, and feeling depressed by the negative comments that they fail to see that there are positive aspects too.

- Keep a database so that you can readily refer to feedback given on the last assignment when making comments on the present one. This relies on your feedback comments on each successive piece of work being produced and stored electronically, otherwise it would become excessively time consuming.

- Ask learners to respond selectively to your feedback on their assignments. This could for example include asking them to complete sentences such as: 'the part of the feedback that puzzled me most was…'; 'the comment that rang most true for me was….'; 'I would welcome some advice on…'

- Ask learners to send you, confidentially, an email after they have received your feedback, focusing on their *feelings*. In particular, this might help you to understand what emotional impact your feedback is having on individual learners. It can be useful to give them a menu of words and phrases to underline or ring, perhaps including: exhilarated, very pleased, miserable, shocked, surprised, encouraged, disappointed, helped, daunted, and relieved.

- Ask learners to tell you what they would like you to stop doing, start doing, and continue doing in relation to the feedback you give them. This is likely to help you to understand which parts of your feedback are helpful to specific learners, as well as giving them ownership of the aspects of feedback that they would like you to include next time. This is very effective and can be easily implemented.

- Get learners to make a short action plan based on your feedback comments. This should then give you some confidence that they are noting what you have said, and are planning to use your advice in relation to the next assignment.

- Cause learners to build on your feedback. For example, ask them to include with their next assignment an indication of how they have incorporated your feedback from the last one into the present one.

- Do not miss out on noticing the difference. Comment positively where you can see that learners have incorporated action resulting from your advice given on their previous assignment. This will encourage them to see the learning and assessment processes as continuous.

Recommended further reading:

Race, P. (2005). *Making learning happen: a guide for post-compulsory education*. London: Sage Publications

Race, P., & Pickford, R. (2007) *Making Teaching Work.* London: Sage Publications