

Good Practice in Feedback

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Introduction

Formative assessment is specifically intended to give feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning and can incorporate a variety of elements including: marks; grades; detailed explanations or justifications; diagnosis; weaknesses; affective comments; and developmental comments (Salder, 1989). In one of the most influential studies on feedback Sadler highlights that the following conditions are necessary for students to benefit from feedback:

1. knowledge of what good performance is
2. the ability compare how their current performance relates to good performance
3. knowledge of how to close the gap between current and good performance

For these conditions to prevail, students should therefore possess some of the same evaluative skills as the evaluator (Salder, 1989). But feedback is traditionally seen as a 'transmission' process whereby teachers 'transmit' feedback messages to their students about their strengths and weaknesses and about where improvements can be made. However, research suggests that students have difficulties in decoding feedback messages and translating them into action; it has thus begun to reconsider the nature of feedback and how it supports the learning process.

It is also important to note the complexity of feedback and its relationship to the current constraints in resourcing in the higher education landscape. As Sadler (2010) notes, the desirability of feedback cannot be separated from the practical logistics of providing it, even though the natural expectation is that students will gain from feedback to an extent that is matched with the effort that goes into producing it. Thus, while students crave feedback, and are consistent in voicing dissatisfaction with feedback (as evidenced in the UK National Student Survey), research also shows that they do not necessarily understand it or use it effectively, and that more feedback does not always equal more learning.

The UK-based 'Osney Grange Group' (OGG), propose that current feedback practices in Higher Education 'are often not fit for purpose' and that current practice 'is over-reliant on written, unidirectional, tutor-delivered feedback'. They propose the following agenda for change:

1. It needs to be acknowledged that high level and complex learning is best developed when feedback is seen as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, and is integral to learning and teaching.
2. There needs to be recognition that valuable and effective feedback can come from varied sources, but if students do not learn to evaluate their own work they will remain completely dependent upon others. The abilities to self and peer-review are essential graduate attributes.

3. To facilitate and reinforce these changes there must be a fundamental review of policy and practice to move the focus to feedback as a process rather than a product. Catalysts for change would include revision of resourcing models, quality assurance processes and course structures, together with development of staff and student pedagogic literacies.

4. Widespread reconceptualisation of the role and purpose of feedback is only possible when stakeholders at all levels in Higher Education take responsibility for bringing about integrated change. In support of this reconceptualisation, use must be made of robust, research-informed guiding principles, and supporting materials.

5. The Agenda for Change calls on stakeholders to take steps towards bringing about necessary changes in policy and practice.

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/OGG%20agenda%20for%20change.pdf>

How then can teachers manage their time and provide feedback that is effective but efficient? The following suggestions may reassure lecturers in their current feedback practice, or support lecturers to make some small changes to facilitate their students' engagement with feedback.

Be aware of timeliness of feedback

Feedback needs to be provided at a time when students find it useful, and when they can apply it. Traditionally, good practice has been considered to be three weeks, but more recently studies have shown that 'timely' means in time for students to apply it for their next assignment.

Manage student expectations by telling them when their work will be returned.

If individual feedback is going to be longer than 2-3 weeks, consider providing some generic 'timely' feedback in class, describing overall strengths and weaknesses so that students have some response that they can apply.

Turnaround time is particularly important for first year students, especially for the first assignment.

Help your students become assessment-literate

Price et al (2012) note that assessment literacy involves a combination of knowledge, skills and competencies. Specifically, they believe that assessment literacy encompasses (Price et al, 2012, p.10):

- an appreciation of the relationship between assessment and learning
- a conceptual understanding of assessment
- an understanding of the nature and meaning of assessment criteria and standards
- skills in self-assessment and peer-assessment
- familiarity with technical approaches to assessment.

There is often a mismatch between teachers' and students' conceptions of goals, assessment criteria and standards. One study showed that students' rankings of assessment criteria for an essay task varied considerably from those of their teachers, accentuating content above critical thinking and argument (Norton, 1990).

Most criteria for assessment tasks are complex, multifaceted and can be 'tacit' in the mind of the teacher.

Sadler (2010) points to a simple but effective pre-assessment activity whereby students underline and discuss all the verbs and nouns that appear in an assignment task, so that they are clear about what they have to do.

Try articulating and discussing criteria and standards with your students in class to help them understand what is required of them. Exemplars (of performance) are also effective as they show your students what is required and defines a standard against which they can compare their work.

Consider the role of longitudinal development or 'feed-forward'

Feedback is often seen as 'correction' but because feedback should encourage students to learn from their mistakes and to develop understanding, increasingly it is seen in terms of 'feed-forward'. One of the challenges of modularisation is that, typically, assessment is compartmentalised and the module is finished before students have benefitted from feedback. If we express the longitudinal value of our feedback, and show our students how to take their learning forward into other modules or over a longer timeframe, then students can feed their learning forward, and have a clear choice where and how to act on our feedback.

When you are formulating feedback, consider it as being both prospective as well as retrospective (Salder, 2010). Try to make your feedback specific (referring to the work appraised) and general (incorporating a broader identification of how the feedback can be applied to subsequent works).

Use feedback to encourage constructive dialogue around learning

Increasingly, feedback is being seen from a socio-constructivist perspective whereby both staff and students are active participants in the feedback process. Feedback can thus be seen as dialogue between teacher and student or a peer dialogue among a community of learners. The use of peer feedback is becoming more popular; however, the complexity of practice in this area must also be noted. Feedback should always be constructive and supportive – studies have shown that students can be impacted emotionally by feedback from teachers; the emotional dynamic of feedback from peers must also be considered.

When students become active participants in the feedback process, there is more potential that they will engage with feedback and that its efficacy will be improved. Not all will avail of the opportunity, but consider inviting your students to explore their feedback in dialogue with you.

Use feedback to facilitate the development of self-regulated learning

It has been argued for some time that in higher education, feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners and that we should focus more on strengthening students' skills in self-assessment (Salder, 1989; Yorke, 2003).

Exemplars can be used effectively to help students gauge feedback and grades

Some teachers hold back the actual grade until students email them the grade they thought they should have received, having *read* the feedback.

Activities such as these can help our students to become actively engaged with their feedback, to critically assess it, and to take responsibility for the work they produce.

Conclusion

Resource constraints and student dissatisfaction with feedback practices has brought feedback into sharp focus in recent years. It remains a complex and challenging area, but by identifying some approaches to effective feedback practice, we can increase our students' assessment literacy, support them in regulating their own learning, and facilitate longitudinal development in assessment.

References

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