Developing Effective Feedback for Learning

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Context and key issues

Teaching and learning contexts in higher education almost always require students to respond to assessment tasks, which may include in-class or online tests, assignments and formal examinations. Feedback is the tool used to help students learn from their attempts at these tasks. It consists of information from specific assessment events that is ‘fed back’ to the learner, and is the key element in what is known as ‘formative’ assessment. The cycle of assessment for facilitating learning consists of an assessment task, a student’s response, an appraisal by a teacher or competent marker, and the provision of feedback.

Feedback has two basic functions. The first is explanatory, and informs students how successful they have been in addressing the assessment task. For objective tests, in which student responses to individual items are either correct or incorrect, feedback often consists of just the total number correct. For tasks that require a student to construct a complex response – such as a report, presentation, procedure or assignment – feedback normally contains details of the marker’s reasons for deciding on a particular mark or grade. This signals to the student that the appraisal process has been undertaken seriously, with the qualitative judgment being arrived at through careful consideration of the student’s work. Such explanations usually describe specific strengths and weaknesses, and how or why the marker arrived at the overall assessment. The second function is to indicate how the work submitted could have been improved. This is in the hope that, in the future, the student could use those comments and insights to achieve a better result or produce a higher quality response to a broadly similar task.

The first of the two functions refers specifically to the student work as it was when submitted, and so looks backward. The second function essentially looks forward. This prospective function is sometimes referred to as ‘feedforward’. The intention is to provide guidance for students so they can learn from, and thereby capitalise on, assessment events. Of course, this assumes that students will be able to both recognise similarity between past and future assessment tasks, and also apply earlier feedback to future tasks. In practice, feedback statements often combine elements of both explanation and feedforward.

Feedback and feedforward in learning

Complex learning usually proceeds as a spiral process. Repeated attempts are often necessary for proficiency to be developed, and good feedback can help this process along. It is likely to be most effective when it helps students progressively develop: (a) an appreciation of what constitutes high quality work of the type they are called on to produce; (b) a knowledge of the quality of their present work in relation to the target of high quality; and (c) a repertoire of tactics that help them close the gap between these two. The ultimate aim in providing feedback should be to equip students with the ability to self-monitor the quality of their own work while construction is under way. That is when it really matters.

For student works of moderate quality, extensive feedback is often provided. However, a really excellent piece often calls for little feedback, especially if not much improvement would have been possible. A very poor work may also attract limited feedback, because the marker may be at a loss to know where to start.

Although the importance of feedback is widely recognised, many academics find that composing good feedback is intellectually demanding, time consuming, and involves an
emotional investment in trying to anticipate how students will respond to the feedback, especially to any negative aspects. At the same time, students’ take-up of feedback is highly variable. Some students seem to ignore feedback completely. This could be because they do not understand the feedback or see its significance for future tasks (a point taken up below); it could also depend on outside factors, such as how well they can manage the competing time demands made on them by family, outside work, or other courses. In balancing their effort across several fronts, learning from feedback to achieve higher grades may not be a high priority if the main concern is simply to pass. Other students make strategic use of feedback and improve their capability to a dramatic degree. The issue for academics is how both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the feedback can be increased.

**Strategies for Developing Effective Feedback for Your Students**

1. **Recognise that feedback is primarily a one-way message sent by a marker to a student, without any guarantee that the receiver-student will be able to interpret it.**
   
   The first hurdle for students is to understand the message. Unless that happens, feedback is almost certain to be ineffective. If it is couched in language students are not familiar with, they obviously cannot connect it with the strengths or weaknesses of their own work. Because teachers and markers have experience and knowledge which students lack, it is often assumed that students have already developed an appropriate assessment vocabulary and will be able to see where and how the message applies to their work.

2. **Ensure specific feedback points directly to the part to which it applies.**
   
   If possible locate feedback (in the form of comments) physically close to the point where it matters, particularly if it refers to specific problems at relatively isolated points in the piece of work. Situating such comments within an overall statement about quality can make it ambiguous. On the other hand, how the work comes together as a whole should be commented on with a holistic comment at the end, and in sufficient detail for students to get some feel for the overall quality when they stand back from the work. On written work, comments in red ink can seem very confronting, especially if there are a lot of them. Some students are easily demoralised. If lengthy feedback is required, identify the appropriate section and invite the student to discuss it with you.

3. **If there are recurring weaknesses in a particular work, identify these as general problems to be avoided in future works.**
   
   Each student work is a ‘sample of one’ from a potentially large group of responses that the student conceivably could have developed in response to a given assessment task. Although specific feedback refers to the work being appraised, it should be framed in a way that enables students to see its implications in broader terms as well. This foreshadowing makes it easier for them to internalise the feedback and apply it as they create responses to later assessment tasks have some structural similarity to the earlier one. It feeds forward into a later assessment event, perhaps even in another course. Generalised comments that apply to the students as a group may be useful, but students naturally find it difficult to tell when or how such comments apply to their own submitted work.
4. Keep feedback about the quality of student work separate from comments about affective aspects, such as effort or improvement.

Students deserve to know, as accurately as possible, why each of their works deserves the appraisal made about its quality. This includes comment on aspects done extremely well, and aspects done not so well. Mixing a strict appraisal of the quality of a student’s work with praise for effort, encouragement for future work or concessions for weaknesses sends a confused message.

5. Ensure that students understand the personal position from which you provide feedback.

Explain that the feedback you provide relates to the work that a student has produced, and does not reflect your view of that student as a person or as a learner. Your role as a teacher involves helping each student improve the quality of their work and develop their knowledge and skill. Letting students know that you recognise that they may feel disappointed, frustrated or even angry with your appraisal still allows you to be straightforward and up front with students about the standard of their work. Personal relations need not suffer.

6. Be creative in the nature of the feedback you provide, and how you provide it.

- The medium of communication can take different forms. In some instances, face-to-face discussions are best. Think also about audio or e-mail for some situations. Avoid the sad spectacle of your carefully composed written feedback languishing in the corridor, uncollected.
- If the quality of student writing – particularly expression, grammar and punctuation – is a problem, introduce students to the many tools in word processing applications and on websites that provide both diagnostic information and suggestions for improvement. Also suggest they take advantage of the support services available free to all students in academic skills, computing and library searches and skills.
- Be prompt in giving feedback. Delayed feedback is often of little use to students, and invites them to ignore it. In addition, it might help students if they are reminded to check back to earlier feedback to see how it might need to be taken on board for the next assessment task.
- Design some of your assessment to be purely formative, not counting it towards the final grade. Students can then be given the opportunity to improve their work by acting on feedback, including that given by other students (peer-assessment), and resubmit their work. This has the added bonus of providing students with experience at appraising works of the same kind they have to produce themselves.

7. Explore the possibilities of using systematic approaches to providing feedback.

Alternatives to individually crafted feedback include some that require only low technology, such as annotating student work with codes that allow students to look up the corresponding feedback statements in a list. Computer-based approaches include those that create a bank of commonly used feedback statements, and then facilitate drawing on that bank for compiling extended statements.

8. Although providing feedback is important for students, it is not the full story.

Giving students feedback is a common and desirable component of teaching and learning. Ultimately, however, students need to become capable of self-monitoring their own work.
both while it is under production, and when they stand back and evaluate it as a complete work. Some emerging perspectives on student learning emphasise that equipping students to engage in complex appraisals through different ways of structuring our actual teaching can reduce their dependence on feedback and, of course, the burden of providing it. One such perspective is outlined in Sadler (2010).

Reference: