

Developing Effective Feedback for Learning

Context and key issues

Feedback is a tool used to help students learn from their responses to assessment tasks. It consists of information from a specific assessment performance that is 'fed back' to the learner, and is the key element in what is known as 'formative' assessment. Feedback has two basic functions. The first is to tell students how well they have addressed the assessment task, and explain the mark or grade. The second is to indicate how the work could have been improved.

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 a 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 sometimes easy for them to assume that students have already developed an appropriate assessment vocabulary and will be able to see where and how the message applies to the work they submitted.
- 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 at the end adds to ambiguity. 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 the student to see the overall quality when they stand back from the work. On written work, comments in red can seem overwhelming to the student, especially if there are a lot of them. Some students are easily demoralised. If a lot needs to be said, 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 the 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 can then allow them to draw on this knowledge when they create responses to structurally similar assessment tasks in the future. It feeds forward into a later assessment event, perhaps in another course. Generalised comments that apply to the cohort as a whole may be useful, but students often find it difficult to tell whether 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 judgement that has been made about its quality. This includes comment on aspects done extremely well, and aspects not done so well. Mixing a strict appraisal of the quality of a student work with encouragement, praise for effort, or concessions for weaknesses sends confusing messages.

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 produces, and does not reflect your view of that student as a person or as a learner. Explain that your role as a teacher involves helping students improve the quality of their work and grow in 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 at all.

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 spectre of your carefully composed written feedback lying 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. Avail yourself of the workshops and self-help services offered through the Library.
- Be timely in giving feedback. Delayed feedback is often of little use to students, and may be ignored.
- 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 involve storing commonly used feedback sentences in a statement bank, and then drawing on that bank for compilation into 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. Sometimes the best type of feedback is indirect, involving contact with, and analysis of, work of high quality. 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 the dependence on feedback.