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WAIKATO
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Assessment: Feedback to Promote Student Learning

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that feedback is an important part of the learning cycle, but both students and teachers frequently express disappointment and frustration in relation to the conduct of the feedback process.

STUDENT CONCERNS

- They cannot understand the feedback comments.
- They feel that the feedback does not show them what to do in order to improve their work.
- They do not understand the purposes of the feedback.
- They cannot understand the relationship between the comments and the grade.
- There is too little/too much feedback.
- There is no chance to discuss the feedback.
- The feedback is too late to be helpful for anything.
- The feedback tells them what they should have been told before they started the task.
- The criteria are unclear.
- The feedback comments are upsetting.

LECTURER CONCERNS

- Students do not read feedback comments because they are only interested in the grade.
- Students are disengaged from the feedback process.
- Writing feedback is too time-consuming for little tangible benefit.
- They don't know how much feedback to write.
- They don't know the best format for giving feedback.
- They don't know what to focus on in my feedback comments.
- They don't know how to get students to understand the criteria.



FEEDBACK ON STUDENT ASSESSMENT TASKS: COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following are some of the questions that staff members ask commonly and some responses based on the research literature:

HOW CAN I ENSURE THAT STUDENTS USE THE FEEDBACK THAT I GIVE THEM?

It is commonly reported that students do not read teacher feedback comments (Duncan, 2007). The literature suggests that a part of the problem is that teachers (and students) see feedback in isolation from other aspects of the teaching and learning process, and consider feedback to be primarily a teacher owned endeavour (Taras, 2003).

Correspondingly, the literature suggests that the feedback process is most effective when all the protagonists are actively involved in the process.

Helpful strategies

While some students may be primarily grade-focussed, there are a number of strategies that can be used to maximise student engagement with the process.

- Design assessment so that students can see the direct benefits of attending to feedback advice. This can be done by breaking assignments into stages and providing feedback which is essential to the successful navigation of subsequent stages. In addition, students can be required to document how they used feedback to advance to the next stage of the exercise. This strategy has the additional benefits of encouraging students' meta-cognition and making them more active participants in the feedback-learning cycle. The workload for teachers can be offset by the reduction of time needed to give feedback on the final product and by incorporating peer feedback into some of the stages (Nicol, 2008).
- Encourage student reflection on feedback comments and give a provisional grade, but invite students to talk about their work and potentially earn a higher grade. Some commentators suggest withholding the grade altogether until students have read the comments and indicated this in some way (Taras, 2003).
- It is possible that students do not pay attention to comments because they do not make sense to them (Duncan, 2007) or that they do not understand the purpose of the feedback process. This is accentuated when feedback is delivered solely by the teacher and is often associated with students as the marking of what is right and wrong. Many teachers may also tend to focus on the correctional rather than the instructional aspects of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
- Prime the students about the nature of feedback and its role in the learning process.
- Actively involve students in learning what the criteria mean and in understanding the goals and purposes of feedback.

- Get students to “mark” and provide feedback on examples of previous work in relation to the stated criteria and then have a class discussion on this (Nicol, 2008). This application exercise assists students to interpret criteria more precisely than is usually the case and helps to bridge the gap between the way the lecturer understands the criteria and the students’ interpretation of them.
- Explicitly link feedback to the assessment criteria.
- Make self and peer assessment a required component of the assessment regime.
- Extend overall conversation around assessment and feedback and make the students more active participants in the whole process. Feedback is then likely to be most useful to students’ learning.
- Use the phrase “feed-forward” as this encourages both teachers and students to focus on future learning.
- Invite students to co-construct the criteria.

AT WHAT STAGE IN THE LEARNING CYCLE WILL FEEDBACK BE MORE EFFECTIVE?

Give feedback as soon as possible after the completion of the learning task. Show students how feed-forward comments can be incorporated into subsequent performance. Sometimes, temporarily withholding feedback is needed to allow the students to internalise and process the demands of the task (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

IS THERE A PARTICULAR STYLE AND LANGUAGE THAT I SHOULD BE USING WHEN GIVING FEEDBACK?

This is a very important aspect of feedback and relates to the way in which students may or not use feedback. Research suggests that comments on students’ tasks are frequently written in language that makes sense to the lecturer but which is not accessible to the students. Inevitably, if this is the case, feedback will remain a one way transmission from the lecturer which will have little to do with the students’ subsequent behaviours. For example, in the study by Duncan (2007) he refers to the injunction of a lecturer to a student to “use a more academic style” a comment which the lecturer obviously understood, but which students in the study reported as difficult to interpret (p.273).

Other common phrases that the students in this study found difficult to interpret and act on include:

- Deepen analysis of key issues
- Sharpen critique
- Identify and develop implications
- Link theory and practice (Duncan, 2007, p.274).

Give pre-assessment practice on and discussion of past exemplars and associated criteria. Such pre-assessment coaching and preparation opens up the dialogue around assessment, and creates the opportunity for developing a shared understanding of feedback terminology. Additionally, such a conversational process means that there is a greater sharing of power between the assessors and assessed and a climate that is more conducive for students' receptivity to feedback. Set aside some class time for decoding and discussion of feedback comments after assignments have been returned (Nicol, 2008). One strategy that Nicol (2008) suggests here is to put students into small groups in tutorials and invite them to share and discuss feedback comments. This would have the additional advantage of heightening students' understanding of course learning goals.

Studies of the impact of feedback on student learning achievement indicate that feedback has the potential to have a significant effect on student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, this potential is strongly related to the quality of the feedback and, unsurprisingly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) note that the most improvement in student learning takes place when students got "information feedback about a task and how to do it more effectively" and it is clearly related to the learning goals (p.84).

- Connect feedback comments after assignments with the learning goals.
- Minimise feedback that focuses on "praise, rewards and punishment" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.84).
- Address achievable goals and make sure that feedback does not carry "high threats to self-esteem" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.86).
- Consider the potential impact of your feedback comments on your reader.

This could also enhance self-regulation skills because it enables students to gradually move away from monologue to conceptualise a reader and direct their writing to her or him. As people who work with student writing can attest, enabling students to make their writing reader-centred can transform the quality of their written communication.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO MAXIMISE STUDENT LEARNING IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS?

Make sure that feedback is related to the learning goals

Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that the "main purpose of feedback is to reduce the gap between current understandings and performance and a goal" (p.86). In this model, feedback must therefore be addressed to three questions:

- Where am I going? (What are the goals?)
- How am I going? (What progress is being made towards the goal?)
- Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)

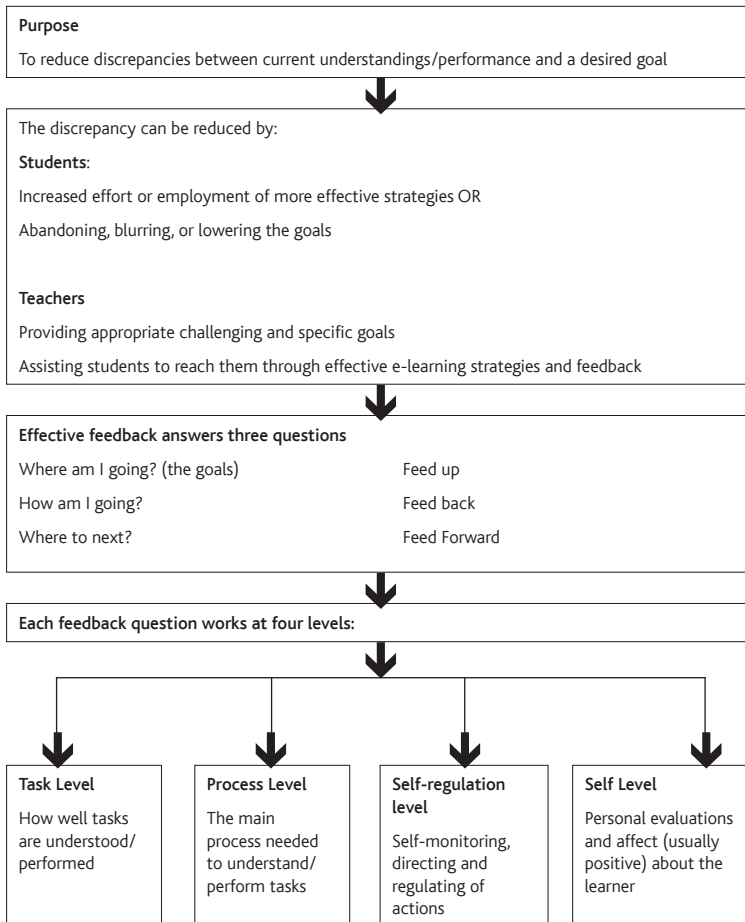
(Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.86)

- Hattie and Timperley's model shows how comments may be related to these questions on four different levels, task, process, self-regulation and self. Feedback on the task in relation to all three questions usually works best when it is accompanied by explanation of appropriate processes and learning can be deepened if the feedback additionally prompts some degree of self-reflection and management.
- Use feedback to demonstrate appropriate ways of enhancing the performance on the task, and offer strategies that invite more learner responsibility to improve.
- Minimise comments on the person. Feedback "about the self as a person" often has no impact on the learning, because it is not linked to the goals of the task for future learning management or behaviours. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), "praise addressed to students is unlikely to be effective because it provides little information that provides answers to any of the three questions and too often deflects attention from the task" (p.96). It should be noted that this kind of praise should be distinguished from praise directed to the performance of the task which can benefit learning.
- Incorporate self-assessment strategies into the process. One simple approach is to invite students to submit a self-assessment sheet based on the task criteria and the marker will give feedback on the self-assessment rather than the task itself.
- Incorporate peer feedback into the assessment process.
- Dialogue around learning can also be enhanced and the power differential between assessor and students is lessened (Nicol, 2008).

If the feedback is formative, getting a range of feedback can enhance a student's reflections on a task and encourage them to think more deeply about the quality of their work (Nicol, 2008). Another positive aspect of the peer feedback process is that students get to see other students' work which can also deepen understanding of the learning goals (Nicol, 2008).



MODEL OF FEEDBACK TO ENHANCE LEARNING



Taken from Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77-87.

The responses to the questions identified by Hattie and Timberley (2007) become far more meaningful when teachers and students are all engaged in the feedback process and when it is managed so as to promote learner self evaluation and regulation (very important aspects of any effective learning process).

HOW MUCH FEEDBACK SHOULD I BE GIVING ON ANY ASSESSMENT TASK?

There is no simple answer to this question, although it is widely agreed that it is not necessarily beneficial simply to increase the amount of feedback (Crisp, 2007). To improve the likelihood of feedback being useful.

Consider the following:

- Ask the students to select an area of their work (in relation to the criteria) on which they seek quality feedback for each assignment (Nicol, 2008). This invites the student to take more ownership of the assessment and feedback process and should motivate them to attend to comments.
- Ensure formative feedback is on task, linked to learning goals and provides guidelines for subsequent performance.
- Prepare students carefully for the assessment task.
- The amount of feedback that is helpful will also relate to how well the task has been presented, the criteria have been worked through in dialogue with students, the nature of the linkage between the task and other assessments, the use of other sources of feedback, and the climate around feedback that has been established in the classroom. As previously noted, conversation on the purposes of feedback is also central to its usefulness.
- Provide “the whole databank of comments that their teacher or teachers provided on a particular assignment to students” (Nicol, 2008, p.10). This can give the students a richer context for understanding their own performance.



WHAT SORT OF FEEDBACK SHOULD I BE GIVING TO EXCELLENT WORK?

Many markers provide minimal feedback on high quality work. While it may be true that the work reaches the expected performance level, good work can also benefit from instructional feedback.

Again, the idea of feedback as enlarging conversation around the work is helpful and students' learning can always be extended.

- Include questions that invite the student to explore or extend a point, or references that direct them to further reading are ideal in this respect.
- Include personal observations. Dialogue can also be initiated by revealing one's own thinking on points they have raised.

GOOD FEEDBACK PRINCIPLES: A SUMMARY

- Promote dialogue and conversation around the goals of the assessment task.
- Emphasise the instructional aspects of feedback and not only the correctional dimensions.
- Remember to provide feed forward-indicate what students need to think about in order to bring their task performance closer to the goals.
- Specify the goals of the assessment task and use feedback to link student performance to the specified assessment goals.
- Engage the students in practical exercises and dialogue to help them to understand the task criteria.
- Engage the students in conversation around the purposes of feedback and feed forward.
- Design feedback comments that invite self-evaluation and future self-learning management.
- Enlarge the range of participants in the feedback conversation-incorporate self and peer feedback.

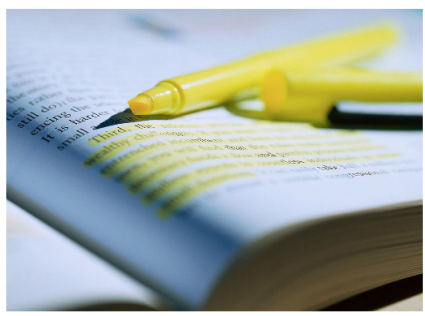


Table 1: Principles of good formative assessment and feedback and questions teachers might ask about their current practice.

Taken from: Nicol, D. & Draper, S. (2008). Redesigning written feedback to students when class sizes are large. Paper presented at the *Improving University Teachers Conference*, 29 July—1 August, Glasgow.

GOOD ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICE SHOULD:

- Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards). To what extent do students in your course have opportunities to engage actively with goals, criteria and standards, before, during and after an assessment task?
- Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks. To what extent do your assessment tasks encourage regular study in and out of class and deep rather than surface learning?
- Deliver high quality feedback information that helps learners self-correct. What kind of teacher feedback do you provide—in what ways does it help students self-assess and self-correct?
- Provide opportunities to act on feedback (to close any gap between current and desired performance). To what extent is feedback attended to and acted upon by students in your course, and if so, in what ways?
- Ensure that summative assessment has a positive impact on learning. To what extent are your summative and formative assessments aligned to and supportive of the development of valued qualities, skills and understanding?
- Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and teacher-student). What opportunities are there for feedback dialogues (peer and/or tutor-student) around assessment tasks in your course?
- Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning. To what extent are there formal opportunities for reflection, self-assessment or peer assessment in your course?
- Give choice in the topic, method, criteria, weighting or timing of assessments. To what extent do students have choice in the topics, methods, criteria, weighting and/or timing of learning and assessment tasks in your course?
- Involve students in decision-making about assessment policy and practice. To what extent are students in your course kept informed or engaged in consultations regarding assessment policy decisions?
- Support the development of learning groups and communities. To what extent do your assessment and feedback processes help encourage social bonding and development of learning communities?
- Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem. To what extent do your assessment and feedback processes enhance your students' motivation to learn and be successful?
- Provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape their teaching. To what extent do your assessment and feedback processes inform and shape your teaching?

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