Giving Assessment Feedback

Overview

Feedback has a significant impact on learning; it has been described as "the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement" (Hattie, 1999). The main objectives of feedback are to:

- justify to students how their mark or grade was derived
- identify and reward specific qualities in student work
- guide students on what steps to take to improve
- motivate them to act on their assessment
- develop their capability to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own learning (Nicol, 2010).

To benefit student learning, feedback needs to be:

- **constructive**. As well as highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of a given piece of work, it should set out ways in which the student can improve the work.
- **timely**. Give feedback while the assessed work is still fresh in a student's mind, before the student moves on to subsequent tasks.
- **meaningful**. It should target individual needs, be linked to specific assessment criteria, and be received by a student in time to benefit subsequent work.

Feedback is valuable when it is received, understood and acted on. How students analyse, discuss and act on feedback is as important as the quality of the feedback itself (Nicol, 2010). Through the interaction students have with feedback, they come to understand how to develop their learning.

When to use

All assessment practices, both summative and formative, should include the provision of "quality, timely feedback" (refer to the UNSW Assessment Policy).

Feedback needs to be provided throughout the semester, rather than just at the end. Regular constructive feedback during the semester enables students to incorporate feedback into later assessment tasks.

Ideally, plan for assessment feedback as part of the assessment design. When you tell students about the assessment requirements, include information on how and when feedback will be provided. Tell students what
specific opportunities they will have to engage with and use feedback in their subsequent learning.

**Benefits**

Constructive, timely and meaningful feedback:

- encourages students to think critically about their work and to reflect on what they need to do to improve it
- helps them see their learning in new ways and gain increased satisfaction from it
- helps promote dialogue between staff and students

Effective feedback:

- guides students to adapt and adjust their learning strategies
- guides teachers to adapt and adjust teaching to accommodate students' learning needs
- guides students to become independent and self-reflective learners, and better critics of their own work
- stimulates reflection, interaction and dialogue about learning improvement
- is constructive, so that students feel encouraged and motivated to improve
- has consequences, so that it engages students by requiring them to attend to the feedback as part of the assessment
- is efficient, so that staff can manage it effectively.

**Challenges**

Students often find assessment feedback unsatisfactory, for a wide range of reasons, including the following:

- When feedback is cryptic (for example, "More", "What's this?", "Link?", or simply ticks and crosses), students can sometimes be unable to gauge whether a response is positive or negative, whether and how the feedback is related to their mark, and what they might do to improve.
- When feedback consists mainly of grammar and spelling corrections, and provides little or no advice for them to act on, students cannot tell what they have done well, what they need to change and why they have achieved the grade they have.
- Many assessment tasks are one-offs, intended for students to demonstrate their achievement for a summative grade; students cannot respond to the feedback with a further submission. Such tasks do not encourage risk-taking, experimentation, creativity or practice.
- Feedback that does not acknowledge the way students' learning has progressed over time does not help them get a sense of how far they have come and what they have yet to achieve.
- Students can encounter different (and inconsistent) comments from different lecturers on similar pieces of writing.

Academic staff report a range of concerns about assessment feedback, including the following:

- Preparing good-quality assessment feedback for students is very time-consuming, in spite of its potential value for improving learning.
When evidence suggests that students have not read the feedback or acted on it, teachers see time and effort put into providing feedback as wasted.

Giving feedback can be repetitive and unproductive. Academics often find themselves giving the same or very similar feedback to many students, or giving the same feedback to repeated efforts by one student, with no change occurring in that student's performance.

Students can focus on negative comments and fail to register positive comments.

If feedback is provided too late to influence learning, neither can it influence teaching, as staff do not have time to adjust their teaching in response to students' performance.

**Strategies**

Devising strategies for feedback can save you time by reducing:

- the number of complaints from students who believe they have been unfairly marked
- the amount of time lecturers spend reading assignments that do not answer the question
- the amount of confusion between markers as to what the submission is supposed to look like.

The time involved to set up the strategies will be more than recouped in the course of the semester.

**Plan for assessment feedback**

**Modes of feedback**

You can provide assessment feedback to students in different modes, at different times and places, and with different goals. In designing for feedback, consider how to optimise feedback across a number of dimensions, as outlined in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Dimensions of feedback modes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>DIMENSION OF FEEDBACK MODES</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| • Comments on a first draft of assignment  
• Online self-assessment quiz  
• Adaptive tutorial | FORMATIVE  
< - >  
SUMMATIVE | • Peer grading of group oral presentations  
• Summary of rationale for a grade |
In any one course, the feedback plan would ideally incorporate a mixture of dimensions, appropriate to the assessment activity and the students' needs.

You can think of the STUDENT-LED/TEACHER-LED dimension as a dialogue between student and teacher, using feedback (Nicol, 2010). Other people may be involved in providing feedback, too, such as a student's supervisor in a work integrated setting, or an invited guest from a professional, community or industry body.

**Prepare students for feedback**

Ensure that students and teachers have a shared understanding of what feedback is, and what it is for. Students may struggle to understand assessment criteria and the academic language used in feedback, so make sure you communicate clearly.

Be explicit about the details of feedback processes and expectations. Ensure that students understand why they are getting feedback and how their learning can benefit from their reflecting, and acting, on feedback (Scott, 2008).

If students and teachers discuss, and jointly construct, the feedback procedures, a shared understanding will develop. A student guide such as that produced by Hepplestone et al. (2010) is one way of making this understanding explicit.
To develop a shared language about assessment and feedback, you can, for example:

- annotate and distribute a range of sample student responses on the same task to illustrate different levels of performance,
- use annotated examples as a basis for class discussion
- let students undertake their own assessments of unannotated examples, justifying the kind of feedback and/or grades they would give, and perhaps annotating the examples for use in a future class

Exercises like this can be undertaken in class before, during and after students complete an assessment task. They can be powerful ways to actively engage students in learning about assessment.

**Align feedback with assessment criteria**

A rubric can help you as you mark, ensuring that you don't overlook critical components of the intended learning outcomes in your feedback.

But don't let an assessment rubric become a straitjacket. Sometimes it's better to offer more global feedback to students, for example, notes about their learning progression over time.

You can use an assessment rubric:

- to guide the interpretation and grading of student work
- to help you frame feedback by making explicit the relationship between assessment criteria and the grade
- to help students understand the rationale for their grade through criterion-based feedback.

For further information on rubrics, see Using Assessment Rubrics.

**Feedback about the whole class**

When you give generic feedback about all students' performance in assessment tasks, you help each student to see where they fit within the range of achievements in the class. It's also efficient, and can be used in conjunction with private written or verbal feedback to each student.

Generic feedback can be delivered orally in tutorials or lectures, by email, or by voice email or voice presentation in a Learning Management System (Moodle). You can then ask the students to identify what action they could take to improve performance.

**Incorporate peer feedback**

Not only does peer assessment provide quick feedback to the student and reduce teachers' workloads, but it can also help students develop autonomy and improve their learning (Falchikov, 1995).

As part of peer assessment, consider:

- involving students and teachers in a discussion of assessment criteria, and
- jointly constructing a standard peer assessment and feedback template.

Students can then use this template to provide feedback for each other.
Students must be free to be honest in their feedback. Making the process anonymous can help here, although you may want them to include their name on feedback that only the teacher can see (Falchikov, 1995).

**Give feedback in lectures**

Lectures are good for providing feedback efficiently to a whole cohort, particularly for large classes. You can identify and address common issues in student assignments, verbally or in a summary handout. To promote dialogue:

1. Ask students to write brief responses (anonymously or not, as you/they prefer) on a particular topic.
2. Collect them.
3. Read the responses. They will alert you to common misconceptions the students hold.
4. Respond to the comments:
   - straight away (the use of **clickers** in large classes can enable a more immediate dialogue about the class's different conceptions and perceptions) or
   - in a subsequent lecture. For a very large class, you might analyse only a few responses each lecture. A common pattern is to use the last 5 minutes of one lecture to invite students to write, then the first 5 minutes of the next lecture to talk about the responses.

**Give feedback in tutorials**

Use feedback to help students understand:

- how their lectures and tutorials or seminars are inter-related, and
- that they can use tutorial feedback to reflect on what they learn in lectures.

Group work in seminars can help students identify ideas where they want further clarification; group work discussions encourage dialogue and reciprocal feedback. Any issues the group has can be either addressed by the tutor or lecturer or exchanged with other groups for mutual problem-solving.

**Use comments sheets**

To increase efficiency, when marking written assignments develop a numbered list of common mistakes or issues, along with tips on how to address these. Then, when individual students make one of these common errors, you only need to write the issue number. Distribute the feedback sheet when returning the class assignments.

This method can easily devolve into primarily focusing on problems or faults. To correct this tendency, you can either:

- build an equivalent list of common areas of excellence in your students' work, or
- only use the comments sheet within an overall feedback framework that also gives students credit when they do things well (Taylor, 2008).

**Be clear about the type of feedback you are providing**

It can be useful to classify the type of feedback you are providing. For example, does it relate to the submission's structure, organisation, language, conventions or content? Sample comments are listed below for these five aspects:

- Structure: "Your abstract should be placed before your table of contents."
• Organisation: "Good problem statement. Where is your outline?"

• Language: "(1) Word choice could be more accurate. (2) Clauses/ideas could flow better."

• Conventions: "Which reference system are you using? Some of your references are inconsistent."

• Content: "The structure of materials, rationale, functions and operation is good, but there is no mention of the process you undertook to generate these ideas."

**Extending the feedback dialogue with students**

When you require students to respond to your feedback, the resulting interaction means that they are more likely to learn from the feedback. When you encourage them to respond to your feedback, you help develop their ability to reflect on and monitor their own learning. Here are some strategies for extending teacher–student dialogue about feedback:

- Teachers mark assignments, provide written feedback and return this to the students. Students analyse the feedback, then indicate the extent to which they agree with it and what they will do to address the feedback and further develop as learners. Before they submit this feedback-on-feedback, encourage them to discuss their responses with their peers. After submission, teachers can respond to students if necessary.

- The "patchwork text" is a formative assessment strategy. Throughout a course, students complete a sequence of assignments that make up an integrated whole. For each assignment they receive feedback from a peer and/or tutor. They can respond to this feedback, and act on it, incorporating what they’ve learnt into further assignments in the sequence (Winter, 2003: 112).

- Ask students what they want feedback on (Nicol, 2010). They can complete a self-assessment sheet, asking the teacher to focus on a particular area. Or you can ask them, when they submit an assignment, to append a reflection on their work—this can be in response to a set of questions. You might ask them, for example, to identify the weaknesses and strengths of their assignment. The marker responds to this self-assessment when providing feedback.

- When students are given a grade on returned work, they are less likely to look at the accompanying feedback (Black et al., 2004). Sometimes it's best to give the feedback separately, so that students will engage with it. For example, give individual feedback first, and require the students to reflect on and respond to it in terms of their own learning. Only when they have done this do you release the grade to them.

You can use this approach in a tutorial or seminar; have students discuss and reflect on feedback with their peers before you give them their grades. Or have them book an appointment with their tutor to discuss their feedback and then receive the grade.

**Ensure consistency of feedback among teaching staff**

- Hold a standardisation meeting with all tutors/lecturers who will be marking assessments to agree on assessment criteria and feedback (type and level of detail).

- Provide markers and students with a model student response from a past assessment task to indicate what you are expecting, in terms of both structure and level of detail.

- Provide markers with a standardised marking criteria sheet with a rubric (see table below, for example) to indicate what is being marked and what constitutes a good, fair or poor answer.

| Understands the subject matter fully |
Use technology

Using technology to give feedback can be as simple as switching on the Track Changes function in Word to comment on students' work, or thinking aloud to a voice email while you read students' work. Or you can use a more sophisticated online adaptive learning tool to provide automated feedback to students as they progress through a learning module.

Online tools

Tools supporting assessment, such as those available in Moodle and Turnitin, are particularly useful for providing formative feedback to students. They offer, for example:

- flexibility, in that students can choose the time and place to take an assessment
- direct links from feedback to appropriate learning resources
- practice opportunities for students in a private online space where they can feel comfortable making mistakes and repeating assessments
- immediate feedback
- increased accessibility to feedback for students with disabilities
- efficiency in providing feedback to large cohorts.

In tests and quizzes, provide standardised feedback for particular student responses (or response types). This takes some work to set up, but reduces the workload once students start completing the test or quiz.

But remember, students dislike feedback that is too generic or standardised (see Douglas, 2007). Consider your feedback comments carefully, and be as specific and appropriate as possible, ideally involving students in their development and evaluation. Make sure that students understand that the standardised comments provide feedback on common issues and that you expect each student to apply these comments to improving their own performance.

Online feedback on written work

In Learning Management Systems such as Moodle, the system's built-in assignment submission tools include functions for providing feedback, recording grades and returning these to the student. Using Turnitin's OriginalityCheck tool for assignment submission enables you to check for correct citation and possible plagiarism, and the GradeMark tool allows you to annotate submitted papers directly.

Within GradeMark, you can use the QuickMark function to select a suitable comment from the pre-set feedback library. This saves you time typing the same feedback repeatedly when common errors are made.

Students can use Track Changes in Word to give each other feedback, and tools such as wikis encourage
collaboration and conversation around feedback, and constitute a record of students' contributions and responses to feedback.

**Feedback through Multiple-Choice Question (MCQ) items**

Well-designed multiple choice questions, with pre-written feedback for each choice, can provide tailored formative feedback. In Moodle, you can add feedback to test questions as you construct them. With tools such as Questionmark Perception (QMP), you can create, develop, assess and report on surveys, tests and quizzes, using a wide variety of question types and incorporating automated feedback.

You can use **Audience Response Systems such as clickers** in face-to-face classroom teaching for multiple purposes, including providing instant feedback and facilitating a peer feedback process.

**Adaptive tutorials with customised feedback**

You can incorporate customised feedback in the interactive learning materials you create.

- Use Moodle's Lesson activity to design a self-directed learning module with integrated feedback and adaptive tutorials.
- The Adaptive eLearning application enables educators to develop interactive and responsive online learning materials. Students can undertake the learning in their own time and at their own pace, and the tutorials respond to student mistakes with customised feedback. The tutorial can also be developed to adapt in response to individual student progress.

**Audio feedback**

Using audio feedback can engage students and enhance your teaching presence. Many tools available on Moodle, such as Voice Board, Voice Email and Voice Presentation from the Wimba suite, could be used to provide audio feedback.

**Ensure fairness**

When designing feedback, take account of any student diversity issues that may affect a student's capacity to receive and respond to feedback. For example, providing hand-written comments on an assignment by a student with a visual impairment would render this feedback inaccessible.

Many feedback-supporting technologies are especially valuable in supporting diversity, not only in allowing you to make adjustments for students with disabilities. For example, students from non-English speaking backgrounds may find that automated feedback, when they repeatedly complete an online quiz, familiarises them better with language and terminology than does orally-delivered feedback in lectures and tutorials.

In general, the wider the repertoire you employ to engage students in learning through feedback, the more likely it is that you will meet students' diverse needs and enhance their learning.
Case studies

For a transcript of the video on this page, see Transcripts.

Benefits of Providing Feedback - Tim Hanna

Feedback in Assessment - Danny Carroll

In these videos, UNSW educators discuss the importance of feedback in assessment and strategies for implementing it.

Additional information

External resources

- Adaptive e-Learning (School of Computer Science and Engineering)
- Clickers (audience response system)
- Electronic Assessment Management—a series of interviews with Dr Cathy Ellis
- Electronic Submission—a workshop given by Dr Cathy Ellis
- Moodle Assignment tool
- Moodle’s Lesson tool for adaptive tutorials
- Questionmark Perception
- Turnitin support site

Further readings


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