



## Giving assessment feedback

### What is feedback on assessment?

Feedback on students' assessment performance is a vital element in their learning. Its purpose is to justify to students how their mark or grade was derived, as well as to identify and reward specific qualities in their work, to recommend aspects needing improvement, and to guide students on what steps to take. Feedback defines for students what their teacher thinks is important for a topic or a subject. At its best, feedback should:

- ◆ guide students to adapt and adjust their learning strategies
- ◆ guide teachers to adapt and adjust teaching to accommodate students' learning needs
- ◆ be a pivotal feature of learning and assessment design, not an add-on ritual
- ◆ focus around course and unit learning outcomes
- ◆ guide students to become independent and self-reflective learners and their own critics
- ◆ acknowledge the developmental nature of learning.

### Issues and problems with assessment feedback

Students often report having an unsatisfactory experience of getting feedback on their learning and assessment, and in particular that they would like more feedback, and they would like it be more useful and usable.

Staff often report that they spend a lot of time providing valuable feedback but cannot see the evidence of students learning from it.

These are amongst the most commonly reported concerns of students:

- **Feedback is too late to influence learning.**

This concern is often the result of the teacher providing assessment feedback too late in the unit, leaving little or no opportunity for the student to learn from it and adjust their approaches accordingly. Assessment feedback that is too late represents wasted effort by the academic, and wasted opportunity for students unless they are required to act upon it.

- **Feedback is cryptic.**

When feedback consists of pithy and cryptic responses by the marker (for example, "more", "good", "what's this?", "link?", or simply ticks and crosses or punctuation marks), students are left to guess whether it is meant to be positive or negative, whether and how the feedback is related to their mark, and what they might do to improve their learning performance.

- **Feedback provides no explanation for action.**

When feedback consists mainly of editing of grammar or spelling, and provides little or no explanation for them to act on, students report that they are often left not knowing what they have done well, what they need to change and why they have achieved the grade they have.

- **Good students miss out.**

It is often students who do well who get the least feedback, often receiving little more than "excellent" on their work without gaining an insight into what they have done well and what they could do to enhance their performance. Often the opportunities to encourage a good student to perform even better are missed by not providing useful feedback.

- **Feedback is "one-off".**

Many assessment tasks are "one-off", intended to demonstrate students' achievement for a

summative grade, but lacking the opportunity for them to try again based on feedback from the first try. Such tasks do not encourage risk-taking, experimentation, creativity and practice.

- **Feedback is not progressive.**

If assessment tasks and feedback do not acknowledge the progression of learning, students do not get a sense of where they are in achieving progress towards longer-term learning goals and what they have yet to achieve.

Academic staff also report concerns regarding their experience in giving assessment feedback, including the following:

- **Preparing feedback is time-consuming.**

Preparing and giving useful assessment feedback can be very time-consuming for academics, particularly in large classes, and its value is completely negated if students don't read it or act on it.

- **Giving feedback can be repetitive and unproductive work.**

It is not uncommon for academics to find themselves giving the same or very similar feedback to many students; nor is it uncommon to give the same feedback to repeated efforts by one student, with little change occurring over time in student performance.

- **Feedback is too late to influence teaching.**

Just as students express concerns when feedback is provided too late for them to benefit from it, academic staff lose the benefit that early assessment and feedback to students provides for them to adjust their teaching as a result of students' performance.

## Characteristics of effective feedback on assessment

To address the typical concerns and problems encountered by students and staff with assessment feedback, the following principles can be used to guide the processes of preparing and providing feedback:

- ◆ **Feedback should be part of the assessment design**, with the processes of receiving and responding to feedback built into and made explicit in subsequent learning experiences and grading.
- ◆ **Feedback should be constructive**, so that students feel encouraged and motivated to improve their practice, and contributing to their positive self-esteem as learners.
- ◆ **Feedback should be timely**, so that students can use it for subsequent learning and work to be submitted.
- ◆ **Feedback should be prompt**, so that students can recall what they did and thought at the time.
- ◆ **Feedback should be justified**, by being based on clear and explicit explanations of performance against stated criteria and standards.
- ◆ **Feedback should be supportive of learning**, so that students have clear indications of how to improve their performance in a developmental progression.
- ◆ **Feedback should be focused**, on achievement, not effort; and on the work, not the student.
- ◆ **Feedback should be expressed in terms of the learning outcomes, so that students can relate their assessment to the learning outcomes**, seeing how they can close the gap between their current and their desired achievement of these outcomes.
- ◆ **Feedback should be consequential**, so that it engages students by requiring them to attend to the feedback as part of the grading.
- ◆ **Feedback should be focused on independence**, so that it leads students to being capable of assessing their own work, by facilitating their development of critical reflection and self-assessment.
- ◆ **Feedback should be efficient**, so that staff can manage it effectively.
- ◆ **Feedback is NOT editing, spell-checking or grammar-checking.** Students should be required to edit their own work, and where possible to resubmit edited work based on feedback about what needs to be done.

# Some strategies for giving assessment feedback

## 1. Designing the optimal balance of feedback modes

Assessment feedback can be provided to students in different modes, at different times and places, and with different goals. In designing for feedback, it is useful to consider the balance across the modes of feedback.

<b>Informal</b> eg in tutorial discussions, explanations and worked examples in class...	↔	<b>Formal</b> eg by annotated exemplars, written commentaries...
<b>Individual</b> eg in personal consultations, through comments on individual assignments...	↔	<b>Generic</b> eg in lectures and tutorials, via group discussion to compare performances...
<b>Formative</b> given early or mid semester, enabling learning improvement and risk taking	↔	<b>Summative</b> given later or at the end of a topic, confirming learning achievement

## 2. Designing formative feedback processes

By designing opportunities into the learning and teaching processes for formative feedback, students can be expected to take more responsibility for critically reflecting on their own learning and how to improve it. Here are some possible strategies to consider:

- » Test at the beginning of semester on what needs to be known at the end
- » Test early in the semester for peer assessment to explore divergent conceptualisations through class discussion
- » Regular (weekly) independent, on-line, “low stakes” tests for students to assess the accuracy of their understanding of key concepts
- » Weekly worked examples on problems at the beginning or end of lectures, with students to comparing their own (or peers’) work with the example
- » Students required to nominate, when

submitting assignments, the emphasis of feedback that they are particularly seeking

- » Students required to include, in submitted work, evidence of peer feedback they have sought, and how they have acted on peer advice.
- » Students required to outline their own personal goals for their next assignment based on feedback received on a previous assignment.
- » Joint construction through class discussion of a grading rubric.
- » Students required to self-assess their assignment using the grading rubric, and including their own assessment with the submission.
- » Students required to self-assess their work using a prepared checklist to review and report on their self-assessment as part of the submission. The assessor can use their own instance of the same checklist, giving the student a way of comparing assessment on specific elements.
- » Generic one-page handout summarising how the class has performed overall and describing the qualities of performances that attracted specific grades.
- » Class discussion on differences between your assessment and theirs on the different attributes in the rubric.

## 3. Providing feedback to large groups

Lectures are a good venue for providing feedback efficiently to the whole cohort. Engaging students in producing brief responses for you to collect can be both motivating for students, and a source of information for you to ascertain students’ extent of understanding and to adjust your own teaching if needed. Students’ contributions can be anonymous or named so you can keep a record of their attendance. In the case of very large classes, you might analyse only a random sample of responses each time. A common pattern is to use the last 5 minutes of one lecture to invite students to write, and then to use the first 5 minutes of the next lecture to address common misconceptions displayed in their brief “papers”.

Here are some techniques (amongst many outlined by Angelo and Cross, 1993) which can be used to frame such writing tasks:

- » The one minute paper  
Students write for one minute on what their

understanding is of the main idea (of the lecture, for example) or the most intriguing point and one or two questions that remain uppermost in their mind.

- » The five main points  
Students summarise in one minute the five main points that they think the lecture was about. This helps the lecturer to see whether students are able to distinguish between key messages, examples, anecdotes, and so on.
- » The concept map  
Students are given a few minutes to illustrate in their own concept map the relationship between ideas; or to fill in a pre-drawn concept map with the links provided, but the concepts removed.
- » The practical applications  
Students brainstorm some of the ideas discussed (in the lecture, for example) and then select two and illustrate ways that these ideas may be applied to everyday life.
- » The muddiest point  
Students write for one minute the idea that is least clear to them at that moment.

Here are some ideas on how to follow up tasks such as these in a subsequent lecture by providing feedback on their contributions, and addressing any particular aspects of their learning that were highlighted:

- » Prepare a one-page summary about their responses (including common misconceptions or questions and links to resources for further practice) for distribution at the subsequent lecture.
- » Use the first 5 minutes of the subsequent lecture to address misconceptions.
- » Explain the structure and content of the subsequent lecture in terms of how it responds to the issues their contributions have identified.

### Useful resources

Angelo, T. A. & Cross, P. K. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques*, 2nd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Juwah, C., Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B., Nicol, D., Ross, D. & Smith, B. (2004). *Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback*, Higher Education Academy, Generic Centre, UK. [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id353\\_senlef\\_guide.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id353_senlef_guide.pdf)

Baume, D. (2008). *First Words: Giving Feedback to Students*, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/firstwords/fw21.html>

There are many advantages with these kinds of activities:

- » They are low cost in terms of time taken by the teacher and the student.
- » They are learning focused and can be used to increase students' metacognitive awareness.
- » Teachers get an instant insight into how students are interpreting lecture content and have an opportunity to clear up misconceptions.
- » Students receive quick feedback on their perceptions and interpretations while they are constructing its meaning.
- » Students can be creative and take risks because it is not for grades.
- » Students are actively engaged in the lecture and are motivated to attend.

### 4. Example answers

Providing examples answers to students, both before and after their completion of assessment tasks, can be a very useful way of making requirements and standards of performance more explicit. Examples of responses on the same task, but completed at different levels of performance, help students understand the way that assessment criteria and standards are applied. Students can be asked to assess example answers in class, giving justifications for their assessments.

### 5. Generic assessment feedback

Providing generic feedback about all students' performance on assessment tasks allows them to see where their learning fits into the range of achievements in the class. Additionally, it is an efficient way to provide assessment feedback, and can be used in conjunction with private written/verbal feedback to each student.

