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. Students may complain that feedback on assessment is unhelpful or unclear, and sometimes even demoralising. Additionally, students sometimes report that they are not given guidance as to how to use feedback to improve subsequent performance. Even worse, students sometimes note that the feedback is provided too late to be of any use or relevance at all. For their part, lecturers frequently comment that students are not interested in feedback comments and are only concerned with the mark. Furthermore, lecturers express frustration that students do not incorporate feedback advice into subsequent tasks. In this booklet, we examine some of the issues associated with feedback on assessment and provide some guidelines for effective practice.

Feedback on student assessment tasks: commonly asked questions

The following are some of the questions that staff members commonly ask 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.

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. One strategy is to 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).

Another strategy to encourage student reflection on feedback comments is to 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 also possible that students do not pay attention to comments because they don't 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). Careful preparation beforehand can help to prime the students about the nature of feedback and its role in the learning process. Students need to be actively involved in learning what the criteria mean and in understanding the goals and purposes of feedback. Particularly helpful in this respect is getting 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. Furthermore, feedback

needs to be explicitly linked to the assessment criteria. Finally, students will participate in the feedback process, when self and peer assessment is a required component of the assessment regime.

Overall, the evidence suggests that when conversation around assessment and feedback is extended and the students are more active participants in the whole process, then feedback is likely to be most useful to students' learning. It is also probably helpful for both teachers and students to start using the phrase "feed-forward" as this encourages both teachers and students to focus on future learning.

? **_At what stage in the learning cycle will feedback be more effective?_**

Generally, feedback has to be given as soon as possible after the completion of the learning task. Students also need to see that feed-forward comments can be incorporated into subsequent performance and overall influence the quality of their learning in positive ways. At the same time, in some instances, 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 lecturers 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 included:

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

Some of these problems could be managed by 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. Furthermore, Nicol (2008) suggests

that there could also be some class time set aside for decoding and discussion of feedback comments after assignments have been returned. 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 achievement (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 is clearly related to the learning goals (p.84). By contrast, the impact of feedback on learning achievement is low when feedback focussed on "praise, rewards and punishment" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.84). Hattie and Timperley (2007) also note that feedback is more effective when it addresses achievable goals and when it does not carry "high threats to self-esteem" (p.86).

Nicol (2008), citing Lunsford (1997), also suggests that feedback can be helpful to students when it is framed in terms of the impact of the writing on the 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?)*
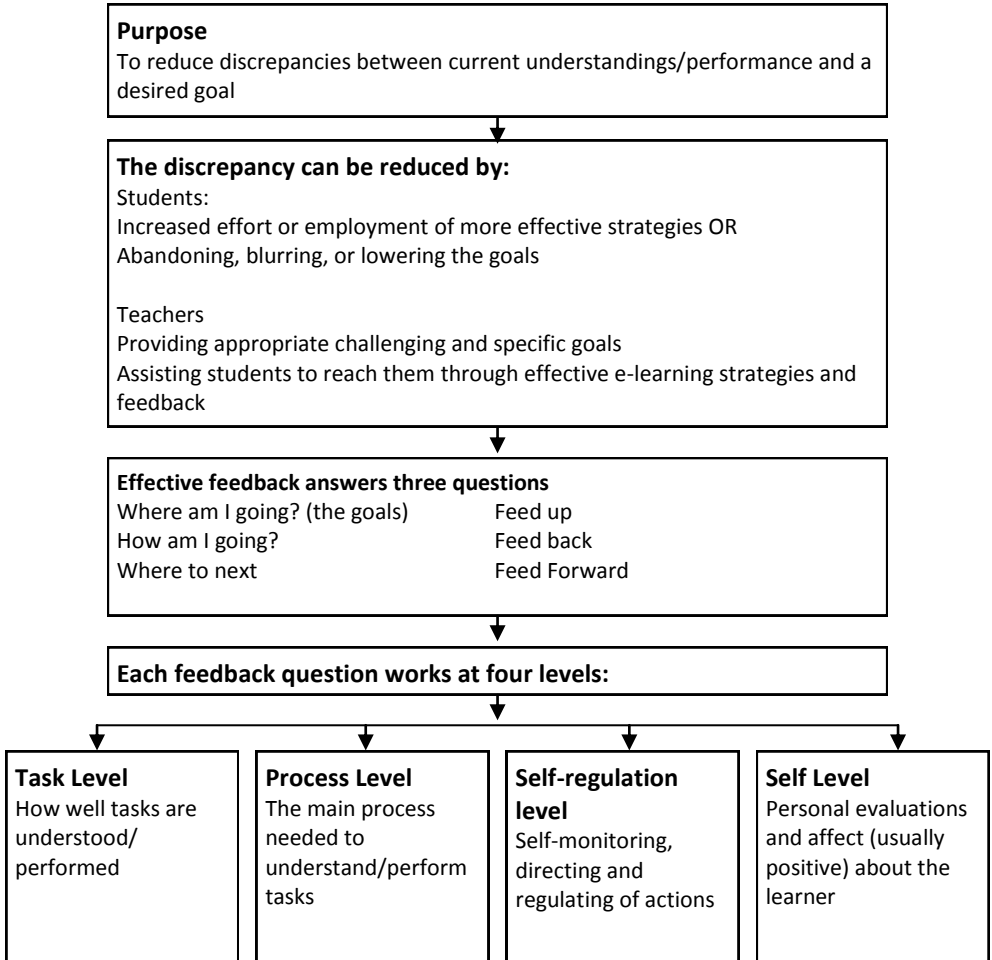
(Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.86)

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. That is, at its best, feedback will demonstrate appropriate ways of enhancing the performance on the task, and offer strategies that invite more learner responsibility to improve. By contrast, 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.

Model of Feedback to Enhance Learning

Purpose
To reduce discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal

The discrepancy can be reduced by:
Students:
Increased effort or employment of more effective strategies OR
Abandoning, blurring, or lowering the goals

Teachers
Providing appropriate challenging and specific goals
Assisting students to reach them through effective e-learning strategies and feedback

Effective feedback answers three questions
Where am I going? (the goals)   Feed up
How am I going?   Feed back
Where to next   Feed Forward

Each feedback question works at four levels:

Task Level	**Process Level**	**Self-regulation level**	**Self Level**
How well tasks are understood/ performed	The main process needed to understand/perform tasks	Self-monitoring, directing and regulating of actions	Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner

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

The responses to these questions 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).

In line with the notion that we need to broaden the feedback process and that learner self-regulation is an important goal of the feedback process, self and peer assessment strategies can be incorporated 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.

Dialogue around learning can also be enhanced and the power differential between assessor and students lessened when peer feedback is incorporated into the assessment process (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).

? 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). One strategy is to ask the students to select a different 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. More important than the amount of feedback given are the other requisites for effective formative feedback, that is that they should be on task, linked to learning goals and provide guidelines for subsequent performance. 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.

One strategy that can help teachers limit the amount of feedback that they need to give to individual students, is to 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 student's learning can always be extended. Further questions that invite the student to explore or extend a point, or references that point them to further reading are ideal in this respect. Further dialogue can also be initiated by revealing one's own thinking on points they have raised.

Good Feedback Principles

► 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

Good assessment and feedback practice should:

1. 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?

2. 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?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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?

7. 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?

8. 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.

9. 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?

10. Support the development of learning groups and communities.

To what extend do your assessment and feedback processes help encourage social bonding and development of learning communities?

11. 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?

12. 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?

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.

References

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