

Giving Feedback to Improve Student Learning

Introduction

Feedback and feedforward are key components of the teaching and learning cycle. Without constructive and targeted feedback and feedforward, students will not have the tools to identify their strengths and weaknesses or to work towards improving a particular aspect of their learning. The importance of feedback in the learning process may have been overlooked when educators were mainly preoccupied with the measurement functions of assessment. Now that we have a richer understanding of the integral role of assessment in the learning process, it is important to complement this insight with a more rigorous approach to the provision of feedback. Unfortunately, international surveys of the student learning experience frequently highlight that students cite the quality of the feedback that they receive from educators as one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of their tertiary experience. Comments on feedback from students include the perception that feedback does not show them how they can improve their work, that there is a poor match between the feedback comments and the grade allocated, that there is inconsistency between specific feedback comments on the assessment and the final summary comments, and that feedback is written in a language that is hard to follow or demoralising. Student dissatisfaction with the quality of the feedback that they receive is matched by educators' perceptions that giving feedback does not have a significant impact on subsequent student performance and that it is a laborious and time-consuming endeavour that results in few obvious benefits. With both parties to the process questioning the worth of feedback and the scholarship arguing for its centrality to learning, the principles for and practices of effective feedback need to be stated strongly and incorporated into academics' learning and teaching strategies. It cannot be assumed that the ability to provide useful feedback on performance which will be acted upon is a natural skill; it is an acquired skill that needs thoughtful conceptualisation and implementation.

Optimally, effective feedback can:

- Enrich and extend the dialogue between educators and learners about course learning. In this sense giving and receiving feedback is another teaching and learning space;
- Prompt students to self-evaluate;
- Accelerate learning;
- Deepen the quality of the learning and improve performance.

Principles for Feedback to Improve Learning

- Feedback should be conceptualised as dialogue about the learning and teaching and not as a one-way transmission process. Askew and Lodge (2001) define it as “all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations” (p.1). This conception of feedback is in keeping with a constructivist understanding of the learning and teaching process;
- Feedback can only be effective and will only be considered seriously if there is an opportunity for learners to act on the feedback to enhance subsequent work;
- Feedback should not just be a matter between lecturers and individual students, but should be part of the learning conversation throughout a course;
- Feedback works best when it is front loaded, that is, the expectations of a particular task are well rehearsed and discussed beforehand;
- Opportunities for self and peer evaluation using task criteria are incorporated into assessment so that students are more deeply engaged with assessment criteria;
- Feedback should be given about performance in relation to specific criteria, identify the areas and extent to which the performance has met the criteria, and those areas where work has to

be done to meet the criteria. Feedback comments should never involve evaluative statements about the person;

- Feedback comments invite the learner to make judgements about their own performance so that feedback conversations can be used to develop students' self-evaluation competencies;
- The language in which feedback is written needs to be accessible to students and provide specific suggestions;
- Feedback should be given in different forms and formats;
- Feedback on assessment tasks needs to be prompt;
- Feedback comments on a substantial task should not aim to be comprehensive, but highlight key points for attention and improvement and suggestions about how to improve;
- Feedback comments should also include some response to the implicit question: "What do I need to do to improve?";
- Feedback comments should always invite students to consider or follow up on something even when a student's work is of the highest standard.

Strategies for Feedback that Promote Learning and Help to Develop a Dialogical Culture around the Feedback Process

- Give feedback and invite student feedback as part of everyday learning conversations;
- Have discussions about the purposes of feedback and how to use it, supported by specific examples;
- Discuss or construct assessment rubrics with students;
- Invite students to give feedback on past samples using assessment criteria;
- Provide feedback in different forums and modes and unpack the meaning of particular feedback comments with students;
- Ask students to indicate the areas of their work on which they would particularly like to receive feedback;
- Encourage students to question the meaning of particular feedback comments;
- Give generalised feedback on an assessment task and invite students to talk about how they understand these comments and how they can use them;
- Attach self-evaluation questions to course modules or assessment tasks (what have I learned from this module?; Where are the gaps in my understanding?; What do I still need to do to achieve the learning outcomes?).

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