Feedback and Feedback Literacy

What is the issue?

Many international experts agree that involving students actively in feedback processes is a key means by which higher education staff can stimulate engaged learning and support student success (Boud and Soler, 2016; Henderson et al., 2019). Effective feedback processes involve proactively helping students to develop their feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018). Feedback literacy is the understandings, capacities, confidence and outlook that you might need to make sense of and actively participate in feedback processes.

Understanding feedback and feedback literacy

Feedback doesn't have to be just an artefact e.g. the comments given by educators. It can be a learning experience which places much more emphasis on student roles in generating, processing and using feedback (Carless, 2015; Winstone and Boud, 2019; Winstone and Carless, 2019; Nicol, 2021). Henderson et al. (2018), for instance, define feedback as 'a process whereby learners make sense of information about their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies' (p. 1402). Feedback works best if students are aware of the purposes and mechanisms of feedback and if they feel it is a process in which they have an active part to play, rather than just being on the receiving end of a process that doesn't involve them.

Learners often need to be involved in supportive and carefully-designed activities to foster these capabilities, especially, but not only, in the early stages of degree-level study. Carless and Boud's model contains valuable reflective pointers about this. For example, they importantly highlight the degree to which educators need to support students to learn to get actively involved in making, not just receiving, evaluative judgements. A good way to do this is for teachers to help students discuss and analyse exemplars (Sambell & Graham, 2020). This kind of in-class activity provides a clear rationale for involving students in peer review activities (Nicol and McCallum, 2022), so students themselves learn to generate, as well as receive, feedback information.

What can you do?

Carless and Boud (2018) have recently usefully helped us better understand the concept of feedback literacy.

Feedback literate students:

- ✓ understand and see the value of feedback processes as a route to improvement;
- ✓ develop the capability to make sound evaluative judgments;
- ✓ learn to manage their feelings in the process;
- ✓ recognise the important step of taking action.

You might also

- ✓ discuss the feedback you received on your assignment with your lecturer or tutor especially if you don't understand it
- ✓ use assessment criteria to guide your work on assignments and to try to evaluate your own work
- ✓ review previous comments you have received to ensure that, where relevant, you are addressing them in subsequent assignments
- ✓ acknowledge that most people, your lecturers included, often feel dispirited by critical feedback; we need to develop good processes for managing this in order to engage productively and calmly with it
- ✓ discuss feedback with your classmates in order to get to grips with the feedback information you've received
- ✓ try to focus on comments rather than just on marks.
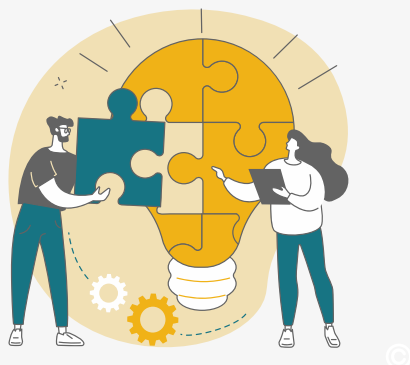
About this resource

As part of the Maynooth University Assess for Success initiative international experts Kay Sambell and Sally Brown developed staff guides on a number of topics in which Maynooth University colleagues expressed particular interest. Inspired by the staff guides, we worked with Kay and Sally to develop student guides on the same topics. All five guides can be accessed in Maynooth University's Assessment and Feedback Hub.

References:

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