



# Assess

## FOR SUCCESS

## Feedback and Feedback Literacy

by Kay Sambell and Sally Brown

### 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, both within the university, but also in life-wide settings beyond graduation (Boud and Soler, 2016; Henderson et al., 2019). In this guide, we will make the case for explicitly supporting students to become skilled and proactive participants in feedback processes which are useful to them, contextual, complex and unfold over time, rather than simply viewing feedback as the receipt of teacher comments on their assessed work. This means placing ample emphasis on the ways in which we design learning environments to promote interaction, student sense-making, uptake and action on performance-relevant information, as well as carefully considering the extent to which our commenting practices on student work are constructive and actionable, but also manageable. It also means proactively helping students to develop their feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018); that is, the understandings, capacities, confidence and outlook they need to make sense of feedback processes, so they can actively participate in them to improve the quality of their learning outcomes.

### Research-informed thinking about feedback

It is worth remembering that our understanding of feedback in higher education has been shifting quite a lot recently. Experts urge us to move away from simply viewing feedback as an artefact (e.g. the comments given by educators) and encourage us to move

## supporting students to become skilled and proactive participants in feedback processes

towards having a focus on learning through feedback, 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). This new way of thinking is exemplified by Henderson et al. (2018) who 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). Consequently, there is growing expert agreement that it is useful to view feedback as a contextual and social process, rather than simply as teacher comments (Jensen, Bearman and Boud, 2022), which are only one possible part of learning-focused feedback processes. Unless students can make sense of teacher comments and use them, they remain lifeless 'dangling data' (Sadler, 1989, p. 121).

One challenge for university educators, then, is to move away from regarding feedback exclusively as expert comments delivered after grading has occurred. Whilst this is often the routine approach to 'doing feedback' in universities, this process, which mainly focuses on the input mechanism, has serious limitations. Unfortunately, teachers telling learners

about their work which has already been summative assessed is patently too late in the cycle from the student point of view in modularised curricula, and often prevents students from using feedback information, because they have already moved on to the next task. Indeed, students may struggle with one-way transmission approaches if they can't work out educators' intended meanings (Sadler, 2010; Winstone et al., 2017). To help students make sense of, and act on, expert comments on submitted work, more must happen before, and after learners receive them (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Hence, effective feedback should, then, be embedded in social interactions and '...take place in formal and informal learning settings beyond assessment; feedforward to future work; and be a dialogic process that ultimately supports learners to become self-regulating' (Y1 Feedback, 2016, p. 23).

Accordingly, new perspectives emphasise that effective feedback is not 'principally about teachers informing students about strengths, weaknesses and how to improve', (Carless and Boud, 2018, p. 1315) but also becomes a question of building feedback opportunities and processes into courses to support student evaluation of their own progress (Boud and Molloy, 2013). It is vital for learners to see what's expected, how they're doing and what else to try if they are to improve. But we have to also consider educator workloads and local contextual factors when designing feedback. We aren't suggesting that feedback interventions should necessarily depend on teachers generating more and more comments on work handed in by large groups of learners, which would be unfeasible for staff, but also fails to reflect the future feedback skills and dispositions that students will require in unsupervised contexts post-graduation (Molloy et al., 2020). So rather than 'doing more marking', instead we're talking about integrating manageable approaches that use, perhaps, whole-class collective opportunities, for example using carefully structured 'clicker' activities, or peer review exercises, or collective analysis of exemplars, or discussion of common errors which educators can help novices pre-empt. You can see examples of indicative approaches in Sambell, Brown and Race (n.d).

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.

## the emotional freight associated with feedback

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, and Carless and Boud's model contains valuable reflective pointers. 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 and 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. Carless and Boud also underscore the importance of the emotional freight associated with feedback, because negative or defensive emotions can restrict students' uptake of feedback information, illuminating the importance of the affective domain (Pitt and Quinlan, 2022) which also has implications for the ways in which we craft the comments we give students on their work. Since teacher comments are just one element of the feedback process, research suggests that what is likely to make those comments be acted upon relies often on the extent to which they are compassionate, constructive and actionable.

### Practical advice

Manageable approaches to creating feedback opportunities to support student self-efficacy in the curriculum might include:

- Building in opportunities which - often collectively and in class time - enable students to **do** things, and then get involved in discussions and sense-making which can help them generate new insights;
- Designing activities which explicitly support students to **make** (not just receive) evaluative judgements, **to discuss and generate** feedback, to access concrete samples of work or other people's approaches (often using exemplars);
- Involving students in activities which encourage learners to understand and apply criteria;
- Involving students in peer review activities and feedback generation.

Some would argue that there isn't time in a busy curriculum to get involved in this kind of in-class activity, but we would argue that the learning gain involved far outweighs any loss of content delivery, particularly since students in the pandemic have become much more used to accessing information in ways other than simply hearing it from their teachers in lectures.

To support students to develop the **beliefs and competencies** associated with feedback literacy you might:

- Carefully plan and set assessment tasks that incrementally build students' skills around seeking and using feedback.
- Plan for interconnectedness, across as well as within modules - so students can clearly see where and how they can close the feedback loop. This can be undertaken in class by using a whole range of small but important low-stakes formative activities as well as written feedback on tests, online quizzes and more.
- Prompt or require students to show how they have used previous comments to close the feedback loop. By using personal tutor meetings, portfolio reflections or other mechanisms to focus students on the ways in which feedback is planned across the programme, we can thereby strengthen their uptake and enactment of feedback.
- Use teaching time to explicitly describe the design and purpose of feedback to learners, so that we're having 'meta dialogues', to get inside the mysterious 'black box' that many students perceive the assessment process to be, by explicitly unpacking the processes and strategies of assessment and feedback. Research shows that preparing students to understand their role within the feedback process, particularly how they can seek, interpret and use the information, needs to occur early and continue throughout a course rather than just something that happens after assessment.
- Share our own 'backstage' experiences of feedback processes and particularly how we ourselves often feel dispirited by critical feedback - from peer review on journal articles - but we have (largely) learned to put it aside or talk to our colleagues, thus helping us feel robust enough to engage productively and calmly with it.
- Get students involved in examining and analysing exemplars, which are useful for showing rather than telling students what good and less good work looks like, to normalise the process of judgment making and allow them to step into assessors' shoes. We can boost this by showing examples of feedback comments, so that students interpret the

comments to decide which samples were best and what further steps might be useful.

- Devise learning activities in which students discuss feedback together, encouraging students to get to grips with feedback information they've received, or we can ask them to make sense of a databank of commonly-used feedback comments.
- Help students to focus on comments rather than marks by giving them the comments first and seeking some response, before issuing the marks.
- Explicitly encourage students to seek and act upon feedback comments (e.g. via Twitter, mentors, peers, members of public, employers) and build student action planning into reflective tasks in the assignments we set.
- Support students to generate feedback in all kinds of informal contexts – given that we know that providing (not receiving) comments is the learning element of peer review (Pitt and Quinlan, 2022).

To ensure our comments are compassionate, manageable and focused productively on learning, we can ask ourselves 'Am I':

- Using accessible language that clearly communicates and, say, helps students see what specific terminology (like critical evaluation or analysis) actually means within my context, as opposed to using acronyms, shorthand symbols or academic jargon which don't help students see what I mean or what their next steps might be?
- Creating comments which focus on the work and offer advice on how specific elements can be developed, and which give the sense that I believe there is potential for development from the students' initial attempts in learning?
- Recognising that receiving feedback is a very emotional thing and this can help or hinder students being prepared to engage with feedback? It's important always to remember the audience of the feedback is often a struggling student so we need to pay attention to the emotional domain. What seems to work best is a tone that is honest, yet respectful, rather than derogatory and dismissive.
- Acknowledging that being compassionate is not about being evasive or fluffy - it's about helping students to recognise what they've done well (so they can keep doing that in future), and what they should avoid doing in the future, so by offering such concrete advice our feedback inputs can really help?
- Providing a manageable number of action points that will have the most positive impact on the future development of the work or learner? Can you link this into a specific example from the student's work if possible, providing suggestions for how to address

it in future work? Don't overwhelm students with too much information. We often feel under pressure to provide more and more detailed feedback to students - however research suggests that the provision of a small number of action points is a much more effective means of encouraging students to engage with their feedback. Paradoxically providing too much can actually result in disengagement from the feedback process.

### To sum up

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. To make this happen, teachers' actions that can help to make feedback productive and transformative of student engagement and outcomes include:

- Getting students involved in their own or each other's assessment through peer discussions, commentary and review, so that gauging the quality of their own work doesn't simply rely on markers' inputs, but instead activates internal feedback (Nicol, 2021);
- Involving the students in progressively more challenging tasks, with feedback guiding their incremental progression towards assessment literacy and enhanced performance;
- Adopting approaches whereby students engaging with assessment tasks and feedback across a programme experience it as a coherent whole, rather than many atomised and separate events;
- Thinking about our comments on student work to ensure they take account of the affective domain, so that feedback information can help them produce better work in the future, whatever their level in the first place;
- Sharing the feedback-giving experience with fellow assessors and students as a co-constructive practice.

### Over to you - what might you do next?

- ✓ Discuss with your course team colleagues how students could be encouraged to be more active in feedback processes.
- ✓ Read more about learning-oriented feedback. If you want a longer read why not look at the highly accessible book by Winstone and Carless (2019) for a more extensive discussion of some of the issues we have covered in this guide?

- ✓ Review your own feedback practices in the light of your reading, and consider how you might adopt some of the approaches.
- ✓ Discuss feedback processes with your students in order to better understand their relationship with feedback and how that might be enhanced.

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