# Developing Assessment Feedback

This guide originally appeared on the ESCalate ITE Help Directory.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to share some ideas on assessment and feedback in Higher Education – although the principles described could just as easily be implemented in other types of educational institutions. It is not intended as a formal academic document, rather, it is intended that the document be used to refresh practitioners on the why's and how's of assessment and feedback, with some practical advice on how to go about applying the principles described within the article.

We need to get students to focus on their learning and away from where they have got to and what they have achieved (as their primary goal). This is part of a larger culture change which will take time, but part of that change is adapting the ways in which we feedback to students. Students need to understand how they are learning and how to progress with it and this is where feedback - in its many forms - comes in. Feeding back to students in order to engage them in an iterative process of using the feedback to produce improved work each time they hand work in, is has also been called feeding forward It is precisely this type of feedback – to feed forward – that is discussed in this article, with practical ideas of how to go about this for the benefit of you and your students.

## What is feedback?

The key to assessment is feedback. Feedback could be defined as any type of communication via a variety of mechanisms or types, of any size or format, that gives information on the quality or standard that a piece of work has reached. It is usually between the tutor and student, but is not restricted to this, and could be between peers or colleagues.

This has been defined in a purposely imprecise way so as to give an idea of how wide the notion of feedback can be, and it is this which needs to be clarified with your students. Feedback is not restricted to the generally accepted practice that it is written, lengthy, and individual. It can be whatever you want it to be - as long as you explicitly let your students know that this is the case.

## Why is feedback important to your students?

Can you remember when you were a student? All that effort that you put into a piece of work which makes you desperate to know if it was okay, if it 'passed'. It is a measure of how well you are doing, and how well you are doing compared with your friends and peers. It solidifies the bond between you and your tutor. It makes you feel like a person to them, and not just another number in the system. Feedback is part of the relationship between students and their tutors. It is also important for peer evaluation. There may be someone on their course who they measure themselves against. Feedback, as defined above, can take on many forms, and unless you are *very* clear with students on this, they may not always know when they are getting feedback - it's up to you to be explicit, and to set their expectations on feedback right from the start of their course.

Feedback is also important as an iterative tool by which they improve their work before they next hand some in – described by some as feeding forward. Your feedback to them is the means by which they can develop and progress their work to achieve better marks. As such, it is crucial that they receive feedback well *before* the next assignment hand in date.

## Why is it important to the teacher/tutor?

Assessment and feedback serve to cement the relationship between you and your students. It is also important in terms of determining the authenticity with respect to their work, and thus avoiding plagiarism or cheating. It shows you care. It shows them that they mean something to you and that you understand their situation.

If, through the feedback of their work, you enable students to feel more appreciated for the effort they put in, then it is more than likely that they will continue to put in at least as much effort for future work. A sense of belonging on the part of the student, a humanising of the relationship between the tutor and the student, should serve to enhance the effort they put in, and the way they use the feedback you have given them. Feedback then becomes more than just a grade, a pass or fail, it becomes a means by which improvements can be made, and personalising that ensures that the feedback is actually used to feed forward to their next piece of work.

## Types of feedback

It is important that you and your students – when you set their expectations on feedback - get past the idea that feedback has to be a miniature version of *'Crime and Punishment'* and that it should be done in hard copy, in triplicate. This may entail a larger culture change for some more than others, and it is up to you as the tutor to guide them through this change, and to give them experiences of feedback that are both apposite to the needs of the course, but different from what they might have experienced before. Ideas on how to do this are given later in this article

The crucial thing about feedback is…timing! Better to give some, any feedback quickly, within a week or two, than detailed feedback weeks or even months after hand in. If, for example, you have 25 3000 word reports or essays to mark, it is better to give students some general feedback as a group, within the first week or so of hand in ,and then to follow this up with detailed individual feedback at a later date – a further two weeks after the initial feedback. As long as you set their expectations appropriately, the relationship between student and tutor is maintained, and not damaged by students wondering why they have not received lengthy individual emailed accounts of their work the day after they handed it in.

The aim of feedback then, is to develop the relationship between the author and the reader and this is not necessarily always served best by technology. It may be better to hand write or sign off after type written feedback. Or, it may be better to go back to verbal feedback to retain the authenticity and commitment to the relationship between the student and the tutor. There are times when technology does have its place in feedback though, and it can be used to enhance the practice of feeding back to students if used fittingly.

## Ways to feedback (and forward) to students

These are just some ideas for the ways you can give feedback - the list is not exhaustive.

- Give an overview of a set of assignments quickly. To do this, give yourself a set amount of time to briefly look at all the assignments in one set (I can do about 20 3K reports in 60 min for this type of feedback - it's a personal thing, but the important point to remember is to limit how much time you give it). Write some brief notes as you go through them on the general quality of the work handed in - 3-4 paragraphs -

then distribute this to your students within two weeks of hand in. This can be done via the institution's VLE or email for example.

- Detailed individual feedback can then follow at a later date, and this can be typed or annotated text.
- Peer to Peer (P2P) work and feedback - set a short essay, get them to mark each other's (if necessary to set criteria) then get them to feedback to their marking partner, and also as a whole group to each other, on the exercise itself.
- Wikis - on the VLE, get them to contribute to wikis for their course, and get them to comment on the pages added to feedback constructively to their peers as the wikis build up.
- Run a discussion board or forum on the VLE that is dedicated to assignments and to feedback from them - P2P and student/tutor feedback as required.
- Run a synchronous chat session on the VLE that is dedicated to assignment feedback. It need only take up to an hour, but might be something that is easier to in a shorter time span than giving individual detailed feedback - use it as an interim measure in much the same way as the overview mentioned in the first bullet point above.
- Presentations - a whole class or group can offer constructive feedback to their peers, and by adding this to your comments, it provides students with a larger amount of feedback to work from. You could also give them a copy of your notes as well.
- Tutorials - if and when you carry out these, make them take notes as well so that they have a written record of any feedback you gave.
- A whole host of class/group activities lend themselves naturally to P2P evaluation and feedback - use them.
- Use of exemplars - read good ones to the class, share good ones or parts of them with the class or with targeted students whose work would benefit from seeing how others do it. This can also be done on a peer to peer basis in a more informal way using a buddy system to engage lower ability students with those that can help them with their work.
- Drafts can also be used as a means of feeding back to students though these must be used with caution and not to enable students to gain better marks directly from the modifications made by a tutor on their draft assignments - better to look at draft plans or notes than draft 4000 word essays!
- Self assessment is also a useful feedback tool - get your students to gauge for themselves just how well they think they are doing. This could be through hand (yes, hand) written sheets done at home or in class, or through personal reflective blogs through the VLE, or through a set of reflective questions set by you for them to answer.
- Blogs can also be used to support P2P work as students could offer constructive criticism of presentations or work done in class through the use of blogging facilities – either in the public domain or through the institutions VLE. These can be tutor facilitated or even, for group work, could be facilitated by a designated group leader within the students.
- Blogs can also be used as a private space – from within the VLE – in which students can record their own reflections, and chronologically record their progress as learners on the course. This is a very useful tool for professional courses, such as teaching or nursing, where such reflective practice is often required as a mandatory part of their work on the course.
- Podcasts can also be used for assessment and feedback. Podcasts – audio and audio-visual, of tutor feedback on student presentations in class could be uploaded to a VLE for future review by individuals in the group. They can also be used for P2P review in this way. A tutor could even podcast an overview of a groups assignments with pointers to further reading for students that can be reviewed as and when required by individual or groups within the cohort.
- Feedback can also be delivered via text messaging on phones or as MP3 files - making use of the latest mobile technology to ensure that students receive their feedback in ways that are convenient and timely for them.

Remember, it is better to give some feedback quickly than none at all for many weks. Think outside the box - feedback can take many forms - all you have to do is be explicit about when and how they are getting the feedback from you.

As stated, this list is not exhaustive, it is intended to give you some guidelines on improving the students' experience in terms of assessment and feedback by helping you to provide timely a, high quality feedback in whatever form suits both you and your students.

## Summary

What I have tried to do here is explain in very simple terms why feedback is important to tutors and students alike, and to illustrate ithe many varied ways that feedback can be given to students if you set their expectations appropriately at the start of your course. Feedback should be part of a well managed and fruitful relationship between a student and a tutor, and should be part of an interactive cycle that results in them engaging in a progressive, enjoyable teaching and learning experience for the duration of their course. The more they are involved in this cycle, the more both they and you will get out of it.