

7 ways to enhance feedback to students

King's Learning Institute

1. Encourage students to reflect on how to use feedback

High quality feedback is not always about giving more feedback but providing feedback that is explicit and gives clear guidance for action. We use dialogue in teaching as a way to help students test out their understanding of new ideas, explore multiple perspectives and defend their positions. But the way we give feedback is often more likely to be a one-way process with few opportunities to explain or discuss what comments mean. Research suggests, however, that students can misunderstand the feedback they receive and do not know how to use it to improve future work.

Put it into practice: Prepare students to be proactive about the feedback they want and the feedback they receive. After returning work ask them to discuss the feedback in pairs or small groups. Get them to identify three specific actions they need to take to improve their work on the basis of the feedback they have received. Alternatively ask students to identify feedback comments that they found useful or decide what type of feedback they would find most useful and explain why.

2. Clarify what good performance is

Although assessment criteria are published in student handbooks and on departmental webpages, even as assessors we do not always agree on what criteria mean. Double-marking and moderation are ways in which we clarify assessment criteria. Part of the process of giving good feedback is to help students to become familiar with our expectations and internalise the criteria for themselves in the same way.

Put it into practice: Provide opportunities to discuss or paraphrase criteria and model answers or give examples of assessed work to help students calibrate their understanding of the assessment task. Encourage students to work in pairs or groups to assess exemplars against the criteria and discuss the decisions they have made. Demonstrate how you would work through a problem or generate a solution and support students to identify how you have achieved the criteria.

3. Provide high quality information so students understand how to improve

The fundamental purpose of feedback is to provide clear information to help students develop as self-regulated learners – i.e. learners who make independent judgements about the quality of their work and self-correct. Feedback therefore needs to be clear, related to the assessment criteria and provide specific ways in which the work can be improved.

Put it into practice: Feedback should always focus on aspects of the work that are under the student's control. It needs to identify both strengths and weaknesses and relate explicitly to the assessment criteria. Remember that you may need to explain clearly what some of these terms mean – e.g. 'discuss', 'evaluate' or 'analyse' and use concrete examples from the assessment topic to demonstrate how to do this. Always prioritise the feedback you give so that students understand where to start or what the main issues are.

4. Support students to engage with feedback

Even though students value feedback and request more, in terms of frequency and depth, they can also have difficulty in engaging with feedback or knowing how to put it into action in future assessments. In particular students can be preoccupied with the grade and overlook formative feedback comments. They may also pay less attention to feedback on final work than feedback received on drafts before submission.

Put it into practice: Ask students to include a cover sheet on assessed work which includes prompts that require them to summarise key feedback they have received on previous work and how they have applied it to this assessment. If possible, when work is returned initially withhold grades and get students to read feedback comments first alongside the assessment criteria and ask them to predict their grade on that basis.

5. Make feedback part of learning

In looking at how to enhance feedback practice we can often focus only on tutor written feedback on final assessments and overlook the opportunities for giving and receiving feedback during teaching and learning in the module. Students will easily identify written or oral feedback on individual assessments but may be less likely to see that discussion in class, laboratories, clinics and online during a module is also feedback.

Put it into practice: At the beginning of a module discuss with your students what feedback is and how it will be given including as an outcome of whole-class discussion or in-class exercises or questions. Explore with your students what they understand the purpose of feedback to be, and expectations about when, how and from whom they will receive it. Get students to brainstorm the forms that feedback can take and discuss these assumptions. Quizzes, exercises, problem-solving or other learning activities are all ways in which students can test their understanding and receive immediate feedback. Ensure that your students see that as feedback too and can make use of it.

6. Encourage self and peer review

If students only rely on feedback from their tutors they will never develop the capacity to evaluate their own work or the work of others. Creating more opportunities for self and peer review can increase the frequency of feedback to students but it is also a valuable activity for developing understanding. Getting students to give feedback on other students' work, regardless of the quality of feedback they receive themselves, improves their understanding of assessment criteria and helps them to use that understanding in their own work.

Putting it into practice: Include opportunities for drafting and revising following peer review as one way to manage this when large classes make tutor feedback on drafts unfeasible. Include an interactive cover sheet that asks students to assess their work against an assessment checklist or the criteria when they submit their work. Alternatively ask students to identify two or three questions about their work that they would like to receive specific feedback on from their assessor. When marking the final work make sure you respond specifically to the kinds of feedback they have requested.

7. Use different strategies to give rapid feedback in large groups

Written feedback on individual student assignments is not the only way to give feedback. Varying the mix of ways in which feedback is provided can ensure feedback is prompt and also help students to engage with the comments.

Putting it into practice: Online tests or in-class exercises can be followed with model answers for multiple choice and short form answers. This ensures immediate feedback on student performance. As well as written feedback sheets, feedback can be communicated in different formats including email, audio MP3 files or in online discussion as well as orally face-to-face. Feedback can also be given to a whole group before, at or after submission. For example, generic or common errors on student work can be provided to a whole group with follow-up specific feedback to individual students. This also means that you do not spend time giving the same feedback to each student on, for example, referencing or mistakes in calculations. An assessment pro-forma with detailed criteria can also speed up the process of giving feedback while giving focused formative comments. For examples of these types of pro-forma see: www.reading.ac.uk/internal/engageinfeedback/writtenassignment/efb-UsingFeedbackPro-Forma.aspx.

Find out more

Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2): 199-218.

An influential paper drawing on research literature to develop a model of student self-regulated learning that underpins principles of good feedback practice. The paper summarises the evidence and provides specific strategies for implementing the principles in practice.

University of Edinburgh *Enhancing Feedback*

An excellent and extensive website summarising the literature on good feedback practice across a number of areas. This includes full references and case studies of feedback practice in the disciplines.

University of Reading *Engage in Feedback*

This website provides a range of succinct resources for responding specifically to the feedback-related items on the NSS as well as tools for staff and students to support student engagement with feedback. This includes several feedback pro-formas for essays and fieldwork, student self-evaluation examples and a feedback audit tool.
