What is feedback? How can its potential for student learning be maximised? Read on to learn about current research on effective feedback practice.

The role of feedback is significant as you develop assessment strategies where the development of learning, rather than the measurement of learning, is considered a high priority. So why do we offer students feedback? What do we expect students to do with feedback? And are we providing feedback at the right time for it to be useful?

Why provide feedback?
In order to deliver effective feedback we need to understand its purpose – for example is it feedback for improvement, about academic writing, or to justify a mark that has been given? It is likely to encompass several things. To help break this down it is useful to distinguish three distinct functions of feedback. These can be described as:

Formative
Feedback that is intended to provide information about future work; to build self-awareness; clarify expectations; correct misconceptions; make assessment process more transparent.

Summative
Feedback that explains a judgement about how well criteria have been met; it may explain a grade; show why/how marks have been ‘lost’ show how a student has been successful. (These can also have a formative function, of course).

Affective
Feedback that encourages a dialogue about learning; seeks to raise confidence; and personalise assessment process.

What characterises effective feedback?
It is helpful to understand what characterises effective feedback. Research tells us that students and staff value feedback that is:

- **Understandable**: Expressed in a language that students will understand.
- **Selective**: Commenting in reasonable detail on two or three things that the student can do something about.
- **Specific**: Pointing to instances in the student’s submission where the feedback applies.
- **Timely**: Provided in time to improve the next assignment and future learning.
- **Contextualised**: Framed with reference to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria.
- **Balanced**: Pointing out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement.
- **Personal**: Referring to what is already known about the student and their previous work.

(Nicol, 2010)

How does feedback support learning?
Research into the role of feedback to support learning offers a blueprint for crafting effective feedback. Royce Sadler, in his seminal work on assessment and feedback (Sadler 1989), established three conditions for feedback to be effective in supporting learning. These were simply that students needed to be able to:

1. Understand what the expected standard is;
2. Recognise the gap between the quality of their work and the expected standard;
3. Know how to act in order to close the gap.
Feedback literacy
Current research acknowledges a shift towards learner-focused feedback that emphasises increasing students’ awareness and ability to recognise, respond to and utilise feedback. Even more significantly, it has also been argued that the feedback students generate internally about the quality of their work is more influential for their learning than the feedback they receive from educators or peers. (Nicol, 2020) Being deliberative in the development of students’ ability to work with feedback confidently and adeptly – nurturing their feedback literacy – is therefore of considerable importance. The following four characteristics of student feedback literacy provide a helpful framework (Carless & Boud 2018):

1. Appreciating feedback: Student ability to understand, recognise and appreciate the purpose and role of feedback.
2. Making judgments: Student ability to make and articulate reliable academic judgements about the quality of their own work, and of others.
3. Managing affect: Students developing emotional resilience and balance in the face of critical feedback, as well as developing habits for continuous dialogue through feedback.
4. Taking action: Student appreciation for the need to take action in response to feedback, and develop the skills to do so.

Sources of feedback
Written
Providing handwritten feedback comments is now an exception, not the norm. In some instances, it may be easier to mark up a script by hand, but factors including legibility and the expectations of students to receive feedback digitally and flexibly now take precedent.

Return feedback online
Not all students can attend campus to collect it. Students want to be able to learn form and respond to feedback in a timely way, but to do that they need to be able to access it readily. There may be some exceptions, but the norm should be for online submission, marking, moderation and feedback processes to be in place. There is substantial guidance and training available to support online submission approaches, including instances of successful adoption from several departments at Lancaster.

Group
Students prefer individualised feedback. This is perfectly reasonable, however in large groups it is not always practicable or necessary all of the time. Group feedback can be useful at highlighting common achievements or weaknesses in student understanding across a cohort. However, be mindful of the risk that students who have not yet developed skills to interpret the quality of their own work may not know whether/how group feedback applies to their work.

Peer and self
As students progress through their programme they develop a deeper understanding of their discipline, and the standards and criteria that are being expected of them. Indeed, by the end of their programme, we could reasonably expect that a
successful graduate would be able to have developed an understanding what constitutes a high-quality piece of work in their given discipline, along with the skills to self-regulate the quality of their own work to ensure it meets those standards. (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006) After all, this is exactly what will be expected of them in the workplace. Using assessment and feedback processes to develop skills of peer- and self-review are therefore significant.

Oral/Audio

Audio feedback can be a powerful tool – just remember that shorter is better. Keep it brief, keep it focused. It is best accompanied by specific written points, and can be excellent for conveying human/affective feedback that can soften critique that may be received differently through a solely written format. Audio narration over videos and multimedia assignments can be a useful alternative to writing comments on a script for alternative assessment outputs.

Feedback can of course be received through a wide variety of means. A staple is the information that is included on specific assessments or coursework. Departments may also have procedures in place to discuss students’ progress with them at regular intervals. Developmental activities may be built into the curriculum, for instance through revision workshops where students and their tutors explore how to tackle sample exam questions. These may also extend to learning experiences and activities, for example, where students may sit in on their peers’ seminar or poster presentations, offering suggestions for improvement.

Timely feedback

The notion of timely feedback has become almost synonymous with striving to meet a four-week turnaround deadline. There is of course value in having this policy in place as at the very least it shows an institutional commitment to students in wanting to ensure that our systems and processes for summative assessments are efficient.

However, this is not really the most important consideration when discussing timeliness of feedback – a sentiment strongly shared by our students. In fact, for most formative work, one would expect that feedback would be provided in sufficient time that a student could apply it when useful – usually sooner than four weeks. And students repeatedly tell us that whilst meeting the four-week turnaround is fine in principle for summative assessments, if this means that the feedback arrives after their next assignment, it’s far less valuable because it’s not timely.

We also know that there may be varying interpretations made by students about what constitutes timely feedback. For instance, Bennett and Kane (2014) found that when responding to the NSS question about feedback timeliness that students viewed this as anything from having feedback returned within a week, within four weeks, always with the same turnaround, and where it was the same as friends on other programmes. So there is merit in understanding and agreeing what constitutes timeliness with students, particularly where there are real constraints that put pressure on being able to return work in time.

This issue can be mitigated by taking an overview of assessment patterns at the whole programme level, and understanding how any departmental practices regarding feedback might impact on how a student experiences the relationships between timings of assessments and modules.
References


