

Seven principles of good feedback practice

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Good feedback practice:

1. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
2. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, or expected standards).
3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
4. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
5. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.

External feedback provides an opportunity to close the gap in the learning process between the current learning achievements of the student and the goals set by the teacher. If feedback information is not turned into action soon after it is produced then this is a missed opportunity. Unless students are able to use the feedback to produce improved work, through for example, re-doing the same assignment, neither they nor those giving the feedback will know that it has been effective.

Specific strategies to help students use external feedback to close the gap are:

- (1) To increase the number of opportunities for re-submission
- (2) For teachers to model the strategies that might be used to close a performance gap in class (e.g. model how to structure an essay when given a new question)
- (3) Teachers might also write down some 'action points' alongside the normal feedback they provide. This would identify for students what they should do next time to improve their performance;
- (4) A more effective strategy might be to involve students in identifying their own action points in class based on the feedback they have just received. This would integrate the process into the teaching and learning situation and involve the students more actively in the generation and planned use of feedback.

Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, or expected standards).

Students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal, assume some ownership of it, and can assess their progress toward that goal (Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998). Weak and incorrect conceptions of goals not only influence what students do but also the value of feedback information. If students do not share (at least in part) their TA or instructor's conceptions of assessment goals (criteria/standards) then the feedback information they receive is unlikely to 'connect'. In this case, it will be difficult for students to evaluate gaps between required and actual performance.

Strategies that have proved effective in clarifying criteria, standards and goals therefore include: (1) Providing better definitions of requirements using carefully constructed criteria sheets and performance level definitions.

(2) Providing students with exemplar assignments with attached feedback.

(3) Increasing discussion and reflection about criteria and standards in class.

(4) Involving students in assessment exercises where they mark or comment on other students' work in relation to defined criteria and standards.

(5) Workshops where students in collaboration with teacher devise their own assessment criteria for a piece of work.

(6) Combinations of the above five have proved particularly effective.

Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.

Another finding from the research is that a great deal of external feedback given to students is not of good quality: it may be delayed, not relevant or informative or over-whelming in quantity etc. Good quality external feedback is defined as information that helps students trouble-shoot their own performance and take action to close the gap between intent and effect. Feedback needs to be relevant to the task in hand and to student needs. Despite this, research shows that feedback information is often about strengths and weaknesses in handed-in work or about aspects of performance that are easy to identify (e.g. spelling mistakes) rather than about aspects that are of greater importance to academic learning but that are more abstract and difficult to define (e.g. strength of argument).

Strategies that increase the quality of feedback drawn from research include:

(1) Making sure that feedback is provided in relation to pre-defined criteria but paying particular attention to the number of criteria.

(2) Providing feedback soon after a submission.

(3) Providing corrective advice not just information on strengths/weaknesses.

(4) Limiting the amount of feedback so that it is used.

(5) Prioritizing areas for improvement.

(6) Providing online tests so that feedback can be accessed anytime, any place and as many times as students wish.

(7) Focusing on students with greatest difficulties.

Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.

The argument has been made that 'a student who automatically follows the diagnostic prescription of a teacher without understanding of its purpose will not learn' (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 54) while Sadler (1989) argues that the purpose of formative assessment should be to equip students gradually with the evaluative skills that their teachers' possess.

Examples of structured reflection and/or self-assessment are varied and might include students: (1) Requesting the kinds of feedback they would like when they hand in work.

(2) Identifying the strengths and weaknesses in their own work in relation to criteria or standards before handing it in for teacher feedback.

(3) Reflecting on their achievements and selecting work in order to compile a portfolio.

(4) Setting achievement milestones for a task and reflecting back on progress and forward to the next stage of action.

(5) Having students give feedback on each other's work (peer feedback) also helps support the development of self-assessment skills (e.g. Gibbs, 1999).

Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.

For external feedback to be effective it must be understood and internalized by the student before it can be used productively. Yet, in the research literature there is a great deal of evidence that students do not understand the feedback given by TAs and instructors (e.g. 'this report is not logically structured') and are therefore not be able to take action to close the gap. One way of increasing the effectiveness of external feedback and the likelihood that the information provided is understood is to conceptualize feedback more as a dialogue rather than as information transmission. Feedback as dialogue means that the student not only receives initial feedback information but also has the opportunity to engage the teacher in discussion about that feedback.

Good examples of feedback dialogue in class include:

- (1) Providing feedback using one-minute papers.
- (2) Reviewing feedback in tutorials where students are asked to read the feedback comments they have been given and discuss these with peers (they might also be asked to suggest strategies to improve performance next time).
- (3) Asking students to find one or two examples of feedback comments that they found useful and to explain how they helped.

Other ways of using feedback dialogue in a planned way, for assignments, might involve:

- (1) Having students give each other descriptive feedback on their work in relation to published criteria before submission.
- (2) Group projects.

Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.

Students construct their own motivation based on their appraisal of the teaching, learning and assessment context. This influences the goals that students set (personal and academic) as well as their commitment to these goals. However, research has shown that external feedback can have a positive or negative effect on motivational beliefs and on self-esteem. It influences how students feel about themselves which, in turn, affects what and how they learn. Motivational beliefs depend, in part, on how teachers provide feedback. Praising effort and strategic behaviours and focusing students on learning goals leads to higher achievement than praising ability or intelligence which can result in a learned-helplessness orientation. In summary, 'feedback which draws attention away from the task and towards self-esteem can have a negative effect on attitudes and performance' (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 23).

Strategies that would help encourage high levels of motivation to succeed include:

- (1) Providing marks on written work only after students have responded to feedback comments;
- (2) Allocating time for students to re-write selected pieces of work – this would help change students' expectations about purpose.
- (3) Automated testing with feedback.
- (4) Drafts and resubmissions.

Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Good feedback practice is not only about providing good information to the students about learning but it is also about providing good information to teachers. The act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the student. Assessors learn about the extent to which students have developed expertise and can tailor their teaching accordingly (Yorke, 2003, p.482). In order to produce feedback that is relevant and informative teachers themselves need good data about how students are progressing. They also need to be involved in reviewing and reflecting on this data and in taking action to help close the learning gap.

A variety of strategies are available to teachers to help generate and collate quality information about student learning and help them decide how to use it. For example:

- (1) One-minute papers where students carry out a small assessment task and hand this in anonymously at the end of a class (e.g. what was the main point of this lecture? what question remains outstanding for you at the end of this teaching session?).
- (2) Having students request the feedback they would like when they make an assignment submission.
- (3) Having students identify where they are having difficulties when they hand in assessed work
- (4) Asking students in groups to identify 'a question worth asking', based on prior study, that they would like to explore for a short time at the beginning of the next tutorial.
- (5) Quick evaluation strategies at key points in teaching.

References:

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