DELIVERING EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

FUTURE FACING LEARNING

Associated Assessment and Feedback Policy Principles:

AF1: Assessment and feedback approaches are transparent and clearly communicated.
AF2: Feedback is designed to be accessible, relevant and timely.
AF3: Students are supported in developing their ability to seek and use a variety of feedback.
AF4: Feedback promotes the development of students' ability to self-evaluate.

Focus Questions

- When is assessment feedback most effective for student learning?
- What are the barriers to students effectively engaging with feedback?
- How can feedback be repositioned as an integral part of the learning process?

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

Feedback is perhaps most frequently regarded as part of summative assessment and routinely viewed as written comments from a tutor on student work. As educators, we want students to use this information to derive actionable insight and guidance that they can then use to improve their work. However, research shows that students struggle to do this effectively, despite academic staff expending huge amounts of time and effort in providing detailed feedback on student work (Carless, 2015).

Shaping student perceptions about the value and quality of feedback starts well before feedback is provided on assessment. Recent research suggests that this may be because student perceptions of feedback rest on a range of factors well beyond the feedback itself – the quality of assessment design, and the clarity of information about an assessment task can influence a student's willingness to engage with feedback. Research also supports the idea that the comments made on student work are only a small part of the complexity of good feedback (Evans, 2013). There is a need to meet minimum requirements of clarity and detail, but improvements to this aspect alone are unlikely to change perceptions of quality. This is especially true when, where feedback is given, its prime function is to inform the students about their past achievement rather than looking forward to future work.

Carless and Boud (2018) expand the view that quality of the written feedback product, its timing, and mode of delivery are key to engagement and satisfaction. They suggest feedback needs to have a dual function in meeting students' immediate assessment needs and in gesturing to the knowledge, skills and dispositions they require beyond modules and programmes as part of lifelong learning. While the traditional view of summative feedback, which is typically modular and restricted to a series of one-off events, and staff monologue responses, the most effective approach to feedback in this expanded view is to understand it as a 'process' and a 'dialogue' which is designed into modules and courses so that students can activate it and use it in an ongoing and developmental way (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015).

Engaging in such dialogic practices might include the submission of draft work followed by generic and individual feedback, iterative assignments where feedback on initial stages helps to inform work in later stages, encouraging students to request feedback on specific aspects of their work, or students receiving feedback on draft work-plans from their peers. It is widely recognised and documented that such a 'process-view' of feedback is integral to assessment which promotes learning, and is most effective when designed into courses and modules as part of a wider framework of guidance and support for student learning development (Sambell et al. 2013).

What can we do?
Reviewing practice

Focusing resources on delivering increasing quantities of feedback, or even on improving the quality of that feedback, does not necessarily guarantee the desired effects.

Hounsell and colleagues (2015) provide a range of useful practical guidance around 'commenting constructively' on student work. This work draws on a body of research that illustrates the fact that students' active participation in this process is crucial. As Winstone and Pitt (2017) note, students may recognise that paying attention to feedback can facilitate their learning, but many underplay their own role in realising such development. It is, therefore, essential for us to understand how best to not only design and send the feedback 'message' effectively, but also how to influence the way students receive that message – what they do with it. Too often students lack guidance about how to understand and use feedback and assessment designs can lack requirements for students to engage with formative feedback in meaningful ways (Winstone et al., 2017).

There is a growing recognition that more can be done with assessment approaches that explicitly promote responsibility-sharing in assessment feedback, what Winstone and Nash (2016) call 'proactive recipience' of feedback; supporting students to actively seek out and make use of feedback information, rather than receive it passively. In their Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit, Winstone and Nash present a range of useful strategies and activities designed to promote students' pro-active engagement with feedback, wherein greater emphasis is placed on supporting learners to drive feedback and become adept at seeking and generating such information for themselves. Here feedback is re-conceptualised as a social practice in which student engagement is no longer just a potential response to received feedback. Instead, students are required to engage actively by entering into productive dialogues with both tutors and peers. The challenge is to create regular low-stakes (formative) opportunities for feedback as students progress. It is important, therefore, to plan feedback effectively and deliberately to develop student engagement, understanding and confidence appropriate to the tasks set, as well as the level of study (Evans, 2013).

It is undoubtedly good pedagogic practice to structure assessment tasks to enable students to take forward (feedforward) their learning from one task to the next (Boud and Molloy, 2013) and the evidence tells us students do value repeated attempts at similar tasks to gain formative feedback (Dawson et al. 2018). However, if feedback does not align from one task to the next then students can find this both confusing, unfair, and inconsistent. A useful exercise is to consider feedback as part of the assessment strategy for a course identifying critical points where it is important that feedback is fully understood and where there are opportunities for it to be acted upon and fed upwards into and through future work. To this end, it can be helpful to review current feedback processes using the following prompts:

Review the allocation of resources and spread of assessment activity to ensure there is space for feedback dialogue. To what extent is it feasible to re-engineer approaches to feedback so that it becomes more 'process-focused'?

Map where feedback would be most useful for feed-forward to future modules and share this with students. Under what circumstances is feedback most useful to students at different points in time?

Seek to develop and align student understanding of the purpose(s) of feedback with that of staff. How can student involvement in feedback through such practices as peer feedback and self-evaluation be promoted and implemented?

Useful Resources

Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Boud, D., Hall, M., Bennett, S., Molloy, E., & Joughin, G., (2014), *Guide to the Assessment Design Decisions Framework*, http://www.assessmentdecisions.org/guide

Boud, D., & Molloy, E. (Eds.) (2013). Feedback in higher and professional education: Understanding it and doing it well. London: Routledge.

Carless, D. (2015). Excellence in university assessment: Learning from award-winning practice. Routledge.

Merry, S., Price, M., Carless, D. and Taras, M. (Eds.) (2013). Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: Developing dialogue with students. London: Routledge.

Stone, D. and Heen, S. (2014). Thanks for the Feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well. London: Penguin Books.