Chapter 8

Giving Good Quality Feedback

Students express dissatisfaction with feedback in higher education in student satisfaction studies, e.g. the National Student Survey (Office for Students 2019) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Advance HE 2019a). This chapter investigates why students are dissatisfied with teacher feedback and suggests ways of improving feedback. I consider how to ensure that feedback is of good quality, and that students understand and can make use of feedback. I discuss the importance of involving students in the feedback process, developing student ability to judge standards of their own and peers' work and developing the student's ability to self-assess and become an independent learner. Students need opportunities to learn from dialogue around feedback, with peers and teachers. Composing feedback on peers' work enhances students' understandings of feedback, enabling them to self-assess their own work and direct their learning. The chapter will also look at the problems of involving students in assessment and will emphasise the importance of preparation addressing the question of how to develop evaluative judgement (Tai et al. 2018).

Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that ‘assessment rather than teaching, has a major influence on students’ learning. It directs attention to what is important. It acts as an incentive for study. And it has a powerful effect on what students do and how they do it’ (2007, 3). Some assessment practices are focused on students demonstrating what they know, rather than focusing on the learning process and how students will continue to learn after they leave the institution. Sustainable assessment involves students completing tasks which equip ‘students to learn for the long term’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 5), developing knowledge and skills that can be used after their higher education studies, so that when
they are faced with life and professional challenges, they can draw on a ‘repertoire of assessment-related practices’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 5) that they have developed to help them problem solve.

Assessment is highly regulated and is often equated with quality assurance and measuring outcomes rather than promoting learning.

Students are constructed as ‘passive subjects’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 17); assessment is something that is done to them. Sustainable assessment requires students to be active in assessment, determining ‘what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and how to judge whether they have learned it or not’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 18). Similarly, students are often passive recipients of feedback messages from teachers and may not understand or may misunderstand those messages. This creates ‘learned dependence’ (Yorke 2003, 489) on the teacher. To move away from learned dependence, students need to learn how to make judgements and have practice in evaluating evidence, appraising situations and drawing conclusions (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 19).

Why are Students Dissatisfied with Feedback?

Dissatisfaction with feedback has been reported in the literature and in student satisfaction surveys, e.g. NSS (Office for Students 2019) and PTES (Advance HE 2019). Dissatisfaction centres around the timing of feedback, feedback quality and student ability to use feedback. Some key feedback issues include the following.

- Slow turnaround times and dissatisfaction with the quantity of feedback given and/or generic feedback (feedback given to the group, not to the individual).

The massification of higher education in some countries has led to large class sizes (e.g. ~700 students). Dialogic feedback is individual, personalised, open to discussion and clarification, and supports students in planning their learning development. Large classes need increased resources in order to give dialogic, individualised feedback to students. With large classes, feedback turnaround times can be more than four weeks, and the longer the turnaround, the more feedback becomes increasingly less relevant to students who have moved on to tackling other assessments. Alternatives such as generic feedback and the use of peer assessment, which can decrease turnaround times, can often produce hostile reactions from students (Wilson et al. 2015), who feel
that their individual needs are not being met. See Chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of peer assessment.

- Feedback is not useful for the next assignment.

This is both a feedback issue and a design issue. Students need to hear or generate suggestions on ways of developing their work, and they need to be able to act on these suggestions in their assignment. Assessments often occur at the end of a module, so feedback needs to be relevant to the assignment in the next module. If there is no opportunity to use the feedback immediately, it becomes irrelevant (Price et al. 2010). Teachers report students not picking up feedback and the opening rates for feedback in virtual learning environments can be low. One inference may be that students do not find feedback useful for their next assignment so do not bother to collect or open it.

- Students do not understand the feedback given.

It is essential to extend higher education to groups that have traditionally been excluded and have not had the opportunity to study in higher education. Non-traditional students in higher education require changes in traditional curricula to address their needs. Support is beneficial for all students, especially students in diverse cohorts with diverse needs, to help them understand ways of studying and thinking within disciplines, and facilitate understanding of academic standards. If students do not understand standards and teacher expectations, they are unlikely to be able to make sense of teachers’ feedback or understand how to use it to develop. In essence, teachers spend a lot of time composing feedback which students may not understand or may not be able to use (Ivanič et al. 2000; Price et al. 2010). It seems student bewilderment about how to use feedback to improve their work fuels dissatisfaction.

- Students feel over-burdened with assessment (Harland et al. 2015).

Increasing use of modularisation, standalone modules and smaller modules has exacerbated the problem of overassessment in higher education. A common practice is to have two pieces of assessment for each module; only one assessment increases the risk of students doing badly on the module or failing. Two or more assessments provide students with more opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills, but also has the consequence of substantially increasing the number of assessments,
especially if the number of modules has been increased. The assessment load puts pressure on teachers and students; it becomes difficult to find time to cover all the module content and find time to prepare students for different types of assessments. Students faced with an increased amount of assessment have no time to do formative assessments, or to have dialogue around feedback with peers and teachers. Increased assessment can force students to become strategic learners, seeking cues on ways to cut corners and achieve good marks. The burden of assessment on students and teachers seriously impacts on good quality learning (see Chapter 4 for more on overassessment).

• Dependency on exams.

In response to large class sizes and concerns around plagiarism of coursework, essay mills and contract cheating (Medway et al. 2018; Amigud and Dawson 2019) exams have become more widely used. Contract cheating entails students submitting work that they have paid someone to write for them; this can entail either buying an essay from a website or paying a contractor to write an assignment. Similarity software cannot detect contract cheating if the contractor has written original content. Concerns over the growth of websites offering such services has led some institutions to prefer a greater weighting of exams over coursework assessment. While some students prefer exams, others may be disadvantaged by an overreliance on exams and there is no guarantee that exams will reduce cheating. With increasing concern over student mental well-being in higher education, increased stress needs to be avoided. Exams often occur at the end of a module and feedback, if it is given, may not focus on how students can develop their learning.

• The affective dimension.

Feedback can have an adverse effect on student learning if the student perceives the feedback to be critical, negative and a comment on their knowledge. The emotional aspect of feedback is under-researched, but studies suggest that power dynamics in higher education can be destructive; students perceive teachers as authoritative and negative criticism from teachers can demotivate students. Ryan and Henderson (2018) suggest that international students and students who receive feedback that does not meet their expectations are most at risk of negative responses. In a study of over 4,500 students, they found that 42.6 per cent of international students felt discouraged by feedback, compared
to only 35.4 per cent of domestic students. Students who receive lower than expected grades also experienced negative emotions. The authors conclude that feedback dialogues and developing trust between students and assessors can support students to learn from feedback.

- Use of (unsupported) teaching assistants (TAs).

As teachers become more pressed for time and accumulate larger marking workloads, they may look for help from teaching assistants, typically postgraduate students. TAs can give excellent feedback as they are closer to the student experience but they need to be supported, mentored and offered professional development; in addition their work needs to be moderated. It is important to ensure TAs have clear understandings of academic standards, that they understand the role of feedback, are aware of the effects of destructive feedback and have time to engage in dialogic feedback (Ryan and Henderson 2018). TAs can make a valuable contribution to a programme, but only if fully supported; this support and mentoring of TAs creates extra workload for teaching staff so more resources need to be available.

- Quality and consistency of feedback.

Academic departments, especially in research intensive institutions, may not make time to discuss standards and compare feedback given by markers. Without discussion, teachers can develop their own (possibly) idiosyncratic views of assessment standards and feedback. This can happen with experienced and inexperienced teachers. Consistency of feedback messages can be better achieved through dialogue between teachers and between teachers and students, checking understanding and socially constructing standards (Sadler 2014) through calibration activities. See below for a discussion of peer review of feedback and see Chapter 6 for an explanation of socially constructed academic standards.

- Too many/too few varieties of assessment.

Diversity in assessment needs to be carefully managed. Too few varieties can disadvantage some students. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of essayist literacy and how the essay can disadvantage non-traditional students (Lillis 2001). However, too many assessment varieties – blogs, vlogs, reflective pieces, quantitative lab reports, posters and oral presentations – may confuse students who need to have practice in different varieties of...
assessment (Gibbs and Simpson 2005). Good practice involves designing a range of carefully planned assessments, linked over a programme. Often, assessments are not connected across a programme; there is no through-line of assessment activity so that students can take learning from one assessment into the next. Assessments need to be planned so that students get practice in assessment varieties and can learn how to get good at each variety before they are summatively assessed. Practice in assessment is vital for diverse student cohorts, as is the opportunity to choose assessment tasks so that students can demonstrate learning in a way that plays to their strengths (see Chapter 9 on inclusive assessment).

**Evaluative Judgement**

Evaluative judgement is the ‘capability to make decisions about the quality of work of self and others’ (Tai et al. 2018, 5) and not just to make those judgements but to defend them, argue persuasively, listen to other arguments and consider whether a judgement needs to be modified. Evaluative judgement can be developed through peer learning, for example through self and peer assessment and through analysing exemplars of assignments with others (Boud et al. 2018). Typically, in higher education, students may not see examples of their peers’ work and this makes it difficult for them to get a sense of the academic standards on the programme and to benchmark their own work. Dawson et al. (2018) make the distinction between epistemological capabilities (what students know and can do) and ontological capabilities (what they are learning to be) and argue that evaluative judgement is ‘an epistemic capability, which students use in determining if they can act in particular situations that are changing dynamically’ (2018, 2).

Evaluative judgement is not a new concept but using evaluative judgement as an organising principle for designing learning and assessment is novel (Ajjawi et al. 2018, 7–17). Rather than positioning students as passive recipients in assessment practices, evaluative judgement places the student at the centre, involving them in assessment design and assessment judgements. In order for students to take on this role they need to have a good understanding of the academic standards in the programme and of what constitutes good quality work (Ajjawi et al. 2018). Research in academic literacies shows that notions of quality in student work are discipline specific and epistemologically bound (Lea and Street 1998), so it is important that students develop an understanding of quality in their discipline(s). Evaluative judgement fits with
the notion of sustainable assessment, as students have the opportunity to develop a ‘capability’ that extends beyond the individual and any immediate piece of work’ (Ajjawi et al. 2018, 9). Ajjawi et al. (2018, 11) suggest five steps for developing informed judgement:

1. Identifying oneself as an active learner.
2. Identifying one’s level of knowledge and the gaps in this.
3. Practising testing and judging.
4. Developing these skills over time.
5. Embodying reflexivity and commitment.

To develop evaluative judgement, students need opportunities to make judgements and calibrate those judgements with others, listening to and evaluating information from others so that they achieve ‘an internal calibration of quality’ (Ajjawi et al. 2018, 11). The external information used to develop calibration judgements comes from peers and teachers, for example, ‘feedback comments [from teachers] should be deployed to help students calibrate their own judgements …’ (Boud et al. 2015, 14). This requires a reconceptualisation of feedback in higher education, a reconceptualisation that places students at the centre of feedback processes as active participants. Molloy and Boud (2013) propose a conception of feedback in which students have control and agency to initiate feedback. They distinguish two types of feedback practices which they term mark one and two. In mark one, teachers are engaged in telling students how to develop. They monitor student achievement and adjust feedback on subsequent tasks to guide student development. In contrast, in feedback mark two, learners are active and have ‘agency and choice’ (Molloy and Boud 2013, 22). Students solicit feedback and use it to develop their learning; feedback then becomes a part of sustainable assessment as students use it to develop their learning both within the university and in professional settings when they leave higher education. Solicited feedback from peers and teachers has a role to play in developing evaluative judgement; this ‘external’ feedback helps students to moderate and develop their own judgement as they consider and analyse the evaluations of others. In this way, solicited feedback builds ‘student capacity for making judgements about their subsequent work’ (Molloy and Boud 2013, 22). The external feedback giver challenges and helps calibrate the learner’s judgement, encouraging greater objectivity on their work. However, it can be demanding for learners to initiate the feedback process so building in support for learners in initiating feedback is important. Similarly, learners need guidance on what to do with the
feedback they receive and how to use it to progress. This has implications for programme design as the programme needs to include practice tasks that allow students to develop skills and knowledge, and to practise receiving and acting upon feedback multiple times.

Molloy and Boud identify seven features of feedback mark two, namely:

1. Students are orientated not only to standards of work (learning outcomes) but also to the purpose of feedback. With this explicit orientation, students are more likely to see feedback as a process they can use, rather than a tool imposed on them.
2. Students judge their own work and are encouraged to articulate this judgement (self-evaluation).
3. Students seek or solicit feedback on those aspects of their work that matter to them most (for example asking the external source to comment on particular aspects of their performance that require improvement). This serves to cue educators and external providers of information into what to focus on to best help learners achieve their goals. This honesty in acknowledging limitations in their own practice does leave them vulnerable, and this honesty can be compromised if students are overly attuned to the summative assessment process, that is, they are always attempting to ‘show their best selves’ to the educator.
4. Educators or ‘others’ provide performance information to the learner.
5. The learner then engages in a comparative process where they combine the internally and externally generated judgements and decide how to meaningfully interpret these messages.
6. The comparison of judgements, and how these relate to the standards or goals of work, are used to generate a plan for improved work.
7. The strategies are implemented in the subsequent participation in later tasks.

(quoted from Molloy and Boud 2013, 24)

Teachers may have different conceptions of quality and may give different feedback to learners (see Chapter 6 on marker reliability) so the aim is to have dialogue around feedback where student and teacher can negotiate understandings of standards. It is unlikely that teachers will have
calibrated standards but if they do, they can share calibration resources with students and use guided marking to develop student understanding of academic standards.

**How to Develop Good Feedback Practices in a Teaching Team**

In order to develop student understanding of feedback and assessment standards, it is necessary to first develop teachers’ understanding of standards. Chapter 6 discusses ways of working towards a consensual understanding of standards in a programme team, and in a discipline through national calibration. Ensuring discussions across the team is key to enabling the team to refer to common academic standards and give consistent, good quality feedback to students. This can be achieved through peer review of feedback using a tool such as the feedback profiling tool described in Hughes et al. (2015). In a review of the literature, they identified five ‘empirically and theoretically derived categories of feedback [namely]: praise, ipsative (comments on progress, see below), critique, advice and questioning’ (Hughes et al. 2015, 1080). Their study drew on Orsmond and Merry’s (2011) categorisations of feedback. They found that ‘praise’ was the most frequently used category, while ‘suggestions for future assignments’ was rarely used. Applying the tool to feedback in five modularised postgraduate programmes, they found that, in these programmes, feedback from one module did not ‘open up a dialogue to continue from one module to the next within a programme’ (Hughes et al. 2015, 1080).

The purpose of feedback is to enable students to effect change in the quality of their work: ‘Feedback is a process whereby learners obtain information about their work in order to appreciate the similarities and differences between the appropriate standards for any given work, and the qualities of the work itself, in order to generate improved work’ (Molloy and Boud 2013, 6).

So, if students are unable to effect change, then feedback is ineffective. Telling (Sadler 2010) students what to do is transmissive teaching, and telling students how to develop, is often ineffective because students do not understand the feedback or do not know what to do with the feedback. In a teacher-centric approach to assessment, such as in feedback mark one, ‘assumptions are made that students will readily learn from corrective feedback and prescriptive guidance’ (Hughes et al. 2015, 1081). For students to make use of feedback, they need to develop
constructions of academic standards on their programme, benchmark their own work, initiate feedback from others and engage in dialogue on how to move their work from where it is now to the next level.

Reviewing Teachers’ Feedback in a Programme

Consistency in feedback is important. Students may receive extensive feedback from one teacher and significantly less from another. Teachers may be choosing to comment on very different issues, so it is important to have dialogue in a programme team about what constitutes good quality feedback, what areas of feedback should be highlighted and how best to give students developmental guidance. One way of ensuring greater consistency is to carry out peer review of feedback. Begin by identifying an area that needs attention and the level of work you want to start with. There may be issues around writing the discussion section of a report, carrying out a literature review, student presentation skills and developing cogent arguments. Select some student assignments of the appropriate level (e.g. first year or final year) which illustrate the issues and, with permission, collect teacher feedback on these assignments. Anonymise and distribute the assignments and feed back to the teaching team. Ask them to read and analyse the feedback given. You might suggest that they use the feedback profiling tool (see below) to help with this. Use the categories in the tool to categorise feedback comments, e.g.

So, for example, in the feedback, ‘When you mention Y’s model you do so uncritically, but you have responded to feedback on your draft and now mention the limitations of applying model Z to your design’, the first section is a critique while the second part of the sentence is a reference to making progress. This would therefore be scored as 1 point for C2 and 1 point for P2. (Hughes et al. 2015, 1084)

Continue analysing the feedback comments and count each instance of each category, e.g. instances of praise and instances of giving advice. Tally the score for each category (the score is the number of instances of each category). Rank the scores so that you can easily see a profile of the feedback given.
### Table 8.1: Feedback profiling tool

Assessment Careers JISC funded
Assessment Careers Feedback Analysis Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Grade if known</th>
<th>Assessor(s)</th>
<th>Formative or summative assessment</th>
<th>Category of feedback</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving praise</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘A well-constructed argument...’</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognising progress (ipsative)</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘This represents a significant improvement ...’ ‘You have taken on board critique ...’</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical feedback</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Correction of errors</td>
<td>Spelling, grammar, referencing etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Factual critiques (of content)</td>
<td>‘I do not think you can say X.’ ‘This is not in enough depth.’</td>
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<td>C3</td>
<td>Critique of approach (structure and argument)</td>
<td>‘It would have been better to conclude with Y ...’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving advice</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Specific (to current assignment)</td>
<td>‘You might want to consider X ...’</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>General points (specific to current assignment)</td>
<td>e.g. on depth, argument and structure: ‘There is scope to tease out further detail on X ...’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>For future assignments</td>
<td>‘In your next essay you should consider Y ...’</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Clarification requests</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘What do you mean by Z?’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unclassified statements</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td>Statements which do not make a judgement, e.g. descriptions of the work.</td>
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Find out more about the feedback profiling tool here: [http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/50671006/Assessment%20Careers%20Project](http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/50671006/Assessment%20Careers%20Project)
Table 8.1 shows the feedback profiling tool, which you can find out more about here: [http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/50671006/Assessment%20Careers%20Project](http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/50671006/Assessment%20Careers%20Project)

Arrange for teachers to share their thoughts on the feedback, they can do this either at a workshop (scheduled alongside a departmental meeting, for example, to maximise availability of teachers) or online using a virtual learning environment where teachers can anonymously post comments on an online forum. Compare scores and profiles across the team and discuss disagreements. The aim is to achieve an agreed understanding of how to best give feedback and guide students to achieve the academic standards on the programme. The feedback profiling tool enables teaching teams to reflect on the categories of feedback they are giving, how consistent the feedback profile is between teachers and whether students are being challenged (through questioning) to develop their constructions of good quality work. Watch this video of how one teaching team approached peer review of feedback and the guidelines they developed for teachers and students: [https://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/8045](https://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/8045).

The feedback profiling tool can also be used with students to help develop their understanding of both academic standards and feedback. Following a feedback mark two approach, students can initiate feedback and analyse feedback using the tool; discussing their analysis with teachers could be illuminating for both parties. The categorisation in the tool indicates the purpose of feedback comments and facilitates analysis of these comments. The tool could also be used with peer assessors (see Chapter 7) to analyse and reflect on the feedback they give and receive.

Ipsative Assessment

As a result of modularisation, feedback seems to be contained within the module, rather than supporting students’ long-term development. Hughes has suggested that ‘ipsative feedback’ best supports development: ‘An ipsative formative assessment activity allows a learner to demonstrate progress and change through repeating activities or through comparing activities that address comparable knowledges and skills. Ipsative feedback then informs the learner of how s/he has progressed, or not, since a previous assessment’ (Hughes 2014, 75).

The competitive nature of modern higher education benefits high achieving learners. Ipsative assessment is about ‘being as good as you can be at that point in time’ (Hughes 2014, 5) and recognising student’s progress not in improved grades but in relation to their previous work.
Ipsative assessment is self-referential and not measured against external standards. It is like a personal best in athletics; an athlete may not win the race, but they may have produced their best performance. Ipsative assessment allows assessors (self, peers and teachers) to recognise and celebrate progress, even if progress does not result in an increased degree classification.

Using Audio Feedback

Technology is increasingly playing a role in delivering feedback and enhancing the immediacy of feedback for example, audio feedback can be given on students’ work and most virtual learning environments contain tools for recording feedback (Lunt and Curran 2010). Audio feedback is claimed to provide a richer, more personalised experience to students as they respond to teacher’s intonation in recordings. A recent large-scale study by Zimbardi et al. (2017) tracked undergraduate student use of both audio and written feedback in a virtual learning environment in two biomedical science courses in a research-intensive Australian university. Students were required to undertake assessments, involving writing reports, to develop their ability to write a scientific journal article. The cohorts were large; a total of 5,960 reports were submitted and marked by 38 markers who used both typed and audio feedback. They found that markers’ audio annotations had nearly eight times the number of words as typed annotations, so significantly more feedback was given to students in audio annotations. However, the quality of the audio feedback was not investigated; the increased word count may arise from the kind of padding naturally used in speech. Students use of feedback could be tracked through the number of clicks and matched to their academic performance. They found high rates of opening and use of feedback in both first- and second-year students; ‘92% of first year and 85% of second-year students accessed their feedback, with 58% accessing their feedback for over an hour’ (Zimbardi et al. 2017, 625). Both years were less likely to use the feedback from the final report, suggesting that students used feedback from the earlier report to improve their final report.
Teaching idea – Paraphrasing feedback

To check on student understanding of feedback, ask students to paraphrase and explain feedback comments.

After you or students (peer assessors) have marked and given written or audio feedback on an assignment, ask students to look over the feedback and either post online a comment that they did not understand or a comment they could understand and found useful (explaining why it was useful). Ask students to paraphrase the comment and explain what they think it means and how they will use this comment to develop their work. Then ask them to look at their peers’ comments and, if they can, paraphrase any comments their peers have not understood.

Review the comments and identify feedback that students appear to have understood and the feedback that students have not understood. Use exemplars of students’ work to illustrate feedback that students have misunderstood. Repeat the exercise for the next assignment to check whether students better understand and can give and use feedback.

Nicol (2010 and Nicol et al. 2014) argues that composing feedback is more cognitively demanding than receiving feedback. When students articulate what they value in a peer’s work, they are articulating their understanding of academic standards on the programme. Students may learn more from the process of judging others’ work than from receiving feedback comments on their own work. The case study below explores what one peer assessor learned from making judgements about students’ work and composing peer feedback.

Case Study: a Peer Assessor Learning from Composing Peer Feedback

Type of programme – BEng
Mode – blended
Level – undergraduate
Cohort – home and international
What’s of interest – study of what a peer assessor learns from composing feedback
This case study (McConlogue 2015) describes the experiences of a peer assessor, focusing on what she learned from composing peer feedback. Ferdous was a second year undergraduate student in medical engineering, at the time of the study. She was studying at a UK research-intensive university, based in an ethnically diverse community. Ferdous was born in Somalia and educated in the UK from the age of 12. She is multilingual, describing English as her third language. She was a diligent student with previous experience of marking student work at secondary school, under the supervision of her teacher.

In the study, Ferdous took part in peer assessment of a lab report. After submitting her report, she attended a ‘rehearsal marking’ session (Falchikov 2004). She had been given three lab reports and the assessment criteria, and had read and written grades and comments on the reports. In the rehearsal marking session, she discussed these comments in a group, compared grades and discussed the assessment criteria. Each group tried to reach a consensus on the exemplars and the teacher collated the results. The teacher joined in the discussion and explained how she had assessed the lab reports. She prepared students for peer assessment of their lab reports by answering questions about technical issues. After the rehearsal marking, students were allocated four reports and given two weeks to mark and submit their grades and comments. To ensure students saw a range of reports, the teacher had pre-sorted the reports into four groups, depending on her judgement of their quality, and students were allocated a report from each group; so they received a borderline report, some good reports and an excellent report (according to the teacher’s judgement). Each report had multiple peer markers and marks and comments were uploaded and distributed online.

Ferdous set about peer assessing almost immediately, skimming the reports and making notes on the basics, e.g. word length, relevant sections etc. She then used her knowledge of the assessment criteria, the discussion in the rehearsal marking and the task instructions to begin to write more detailed comments on the reports. She diligently composed around 500 words of peer feedback for each report and estimated that it took her about four to five hours to mark the four reports.

She seemed to learn a great deal from reading and commenting on the reports. She benchmarked her own work against her peers. She learned from the weaker reports, seeing things that had been done well in them. She said she could see ‘negatives and positives in everyone’s report’. Seeing the range seemed to help her develop ideas of how to improve her own work and what she needed to do to move on to the next
level. The process of comparing her work and her peers’ reports, writing comments and interpreting the assessment criteria seemed to develop her understanding of academic standards. Interestingly, seeing a range of reports seemed far more important than seeing an ‘excellent’ report. Ferdous commented that the excellent report was ‘complicated’ and that she ‘couldn’t replicate it’, suggesting that it was too far removed from her own stage of development. The other reports helped her develop ideas and strategies for moving on.

Further Reading


Follow-Up

Reading

On evaluative judgement:


On what students learn from composing feedback:


Think about how you could provide opportunities to develop students’ evaluative judgement on your programme. What activities could you introduce? For ideas see:


Investigating Your Practice

Investigate feedback in your team. Carry out a peer review of feedback (see a suggested plan in the section ‘How to develop good feedback practices in a teaching team’ above). Use the feedback profiling tool or similar to analyse feedback. Involve the team and students in creating guidelines for feedback. Implement the new guidelines and follow-up with an evaluation of teacher and student perceptions of whether the quality and usefulness of feedback improved.