# GETTING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH FEEDBACK

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## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Assessors complain that they spend hours devising and delivering good feedback via comments on assessed work, in class, in studio critiques, on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), in one-to-ones and in tutorials, only to find that students seem to either ignore the formative comments or complain they never get any feedback. If students ignore or trivialise our feedback, it cannot help them however detailed and supportive it is. Students' failure to engage with feedback not only is unhelpful to them and frustrating for us, but also impacts negatively on Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) scores.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Feedback without action is unproductive, but Winstone, Nash, Rowntree and Parker (2017a) found four broad psychological processes stopped effective use by students of all the hard work undertaken by assessors. These processes were awareness of what the feedback means and its purposes; awareness of strategies by which the feedback could be implemented; within students the absence of a sense of empowerment to implement strategies; and a lack of proactivity and receptiveness to scrutinise feedback and implement strategies to improve their work. In a three-year study which focused on engaging students with assessment feedback, Price, Handley and Millar (2011) argue that a more holistic, socially-embedded conceptualisation of feedback and engagement is needed to ensure that students use feedback to develop their learning, rather than respond mechanistically to the tutors' 'instruction'. Hence, we need to explore tactics which aim to develop the role of students as active users of feedback, so our feedback helps them learn throughout the process.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

In a systematic review of interventions designed to enhance students' capacity to use feedback, Winstone, Nash, Parker and Rowntree (2017b) found four key processes were important to target: self-appraisal, assessment literacy, goal-setting and self-regulation, and motivation. Hence we might:

### 1. EMPHASISE EARLY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMATIVE FEEDBACK TO THEIR DEVELOPMENT

We should stress to students in induction and throughout programmes that the feedback we provide is not like some of the negative criticisms and 'corrections' they might have encountered previously, but is instead designed to help them to achieve their best and learn to regulate their own work.

### 2. CONSIDER HOW BEST TO PROVIDE THEM WITH FEEDBACK

Many students only really recognise written comments on assignments as feedback, without realising that feedback designs including in-class commentary, critiques in practical sessions, advice in informal and formal meetings, cohort reports and comments on common errors on current assignments delivered during lectures are all forms of feedback. Without going over the top, we may wish to flag to them when these other feedback methods are being engaged.

### 3. PROVIDE THEM WITH TRAINING ON WHY AND HOW FEEDBACK IS PROVIDED TO RAISE THEIR COGNISANCE OF WHAT THEY CAN DO

For example, in threes and fours we could give them several examples of real feedback given to former students on an assignment and ask them to rank order the students' work, indicating from the comments which they thought were best. This can help them develop their assessment literacy, that is, a better understanding of how assessment systems and processes work.

### 4. GET STUDENTS TO PRACTICE DRAFTING AND DELIVERING FEEDBACK

Engaging students in informal peer review or more formal peer assessment (with training and rehearsal) can help them recognise what a complex and nuanced task it is, and how important it can be in identifying routes to enhanced achievement. It can also help them get better at gauging the quality of the work they produce while they are actually producing it, (Sadler, 2010) by giving them experiences of framing, phrasing and delivering commentaries that aren't just judgmental ('that's rubbish!') but are instead designed to bring about improvements in future work (some term this 'feedforward'). This may lead them to recognise the skill necessary to provide good feedback and result in them taking ours more seriously, as well as productively engaging them with assessment criteria.

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## 5. GET STUDENTS TO FOCUS ON COMMENTS RATHER THAN MARKS

There is a belief that when students are provided with marks and feedback on an assignment that students will only focus on the marks. To address this we could provide a commentary or return work to them with words (or audio) only and then ask them to deduce their marks from what you say/write in relation to each criterion (this assumes that students have access to grading sheets or criteria). Only when they've had a stab at estimating their grades should they then access the mark you've awarded. You could arrange to do this in a two-stage process, perhaps meeting them in between or asking them to write a brief reflection. It might be possible to automate much of this using your institute's VLE.

## 6. HELP STUDENTS TO BELIEVE THEY HAVE THE AGENCY TO IMPROVE THEIR WORK:

By giving specific and practical advice on how to improve, we can move them away from a mindset that tells them they can't improve due to lack of innate talent.

## 7. CONSIDER USING TWO-STAGE/PATCHWORK ASSIGNMENTS

A two-stage (or patchwork) assignment consists of two or more related phases or tasks in which feedback from the initial phase(s) can be used to enhance the quality of work of subsequent phases. Often this might take the form of a draft of an essay or report and then the final version. Equally the initial stages might focus on key processes involved in the production of the final assignment e.g. a literature review, specifications or user requirements, a conceptual design, flow chart, a project plan, etc. The advantage of two-stage assignments is that learners can readily appreciate how the feedback on the first stage can be applied and used to improve performance on the second or subsequent stages.

## 8. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO THINK OF FEEDBACK AS A TRIGGER TO THEM TAKING ACTION

If they become active in the use of the feedback we give them, rather than passive recipients of our comments, they are more likely to do better work in the future. Help them recognise their responsibility in the feedback process by explicitly helping them set overall targets and plans for future work, and by setting students initial tasks which enable them to apply what they've learned to a connected follow-up task.

## 9. PAY MORE ATTENTION TO ASCERTAINING WHETHER AND HOW FEEDBACK HAS BEEN UNDERSTOOD AND ACTED UPON

For example by offering opportunities for students to discuss their feedback with markers, (so you can check they have grasped the main messages and have suitable implementation strategies), or asking students to explain how they responded to feedback in a two-stage or patchwork assignment or follow-up task.

## 10. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO MONITOR AND REVIEW THEIR RESPONSES TO FEEDBACK AS THEY MOVE THROUGH THE PROGRAMME

We can build occasional touch points into programmes which focus on encouraging students to document and evaluate their overall performance and feedback over time. Dedicated opportunities to discuss feedback might focus on supporting students to compile action plans and feedback portfolios, thereby developing their goal-setting skills and enhancing self-regulation.

## 11. GIVE THEM SOME EXAMPLES OF HELPFUL FEEDBACK AS A PROMPT TO DISCUSSION

If students in-class scrutinise what good feedback looks like and is aiming to achieve, and the ways in which it is prompting them to apply the feedback, it may help them be more mindful of the feedback they receive and to take it more seriously.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

It's important not to assume that students necessarily share our conceptions of the importance and value of formative feedback as a means of helping them transform their practice. If they do nothing as a result of our feedback, we may need to question our approaches and delivery, while recognising that a few will take no resultant action whatever we do!

## REFERENCES

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