

COMMENTING CONSTRUCTIVELY ON ASSESSED WORK

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Students put great store by the comments we put on their work. They often come to higher education with high expectations about the nature and value of teacher comments, and look to them to provide them with authoritative guidance on their learning and performance. Where that provision is found wanting, unhelpful or unconstructive, students rapidly become disenchanted, disappointed and alienated.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Concentrating on helping students gain access to helpful, motivational and developmental feedback has been acknowledged as one of the most valuable things institutions can do for their learners (Brown, 2015; QAA, 2017; Sparqs, n.d.). While there is growing emphasis on achieving a broader, more nuanced view of feedback, which extends well beyond the provision of input information (Boud and Molloy, 2013), nevertheless, tutors' commenting practices can have an important part to play in the overall feedback and guidance loop (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008).

Students await tutor comments eagerly (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002), so it's probably sensible to try as far as possible to provide feedback comments to students in ways which are most likely to make a difference to the quality of their learning (Hounsell, n.d.).

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. CONSIDER THE TONE OF OUR FEEDBACK

It's important to strive to achieve a tone which is honest, yet respectful, since there is a strong affective and interpersonal dimension to feedback. Feedback that is overly negative may act as a powerful disincentive for student learning, particularly for those students who already have low self-esteem. We need to avoid 'shorthand' and derogatory remarks (such as 'slapdash work', 'under-developed', 'weak argument' and so on) that might leave students feeling discouraged. Hedging tactics ('perhaps you could try to...' 'I wondered if...') can take the sting out of overly-direct criticisms (although watch out for this reducing the force of your suggestions and leading to misunderstandings).

Helpful feedback makes a conscious distinction between the person (who is always valued) and particular outputs/work, so it can be useful to be careful to focus comments on the task and processes which underpin successful achievement, not the individual.

2. BE AS CLEAR AS POSSIBLE

From students' viewpoints, many of the comments they receive from academics seem vague, overly complex and difficult to understand. We must say what we mean and avoid wrapping things up in jargon and fancy words.

To help students improve we can provide precise examples of where the particular piece of work seems to have fallen short, or specific suggestions about how the student might go about remedying it. We can try, for example, to explain, amplify, illustrate and provide examples. It helps if we can enable students to understand what aspects of their work needs revisiting and why by giving concrete examples, if we can.

3. BE REALISTIC

We can focus our comments on things that the recipient is likely to be able to do something about and avoid suggesting things that are likely to be way beyond their scope.

We can attempt to strike a balance between offering too few and too many comments. It's useful to offer more than a few ticks in the margins or a grade, but not to give so many comments as to intimidate or overwhelm. For instance, we might choose three main things to focus on for them to improve. Specific comments based on identifiable, concrete behaviour that can be changed are likely to be more helpful than any generalisations.

4. HELP STUDENTS SEE HOW THEY MIGHT APPLY THE FEEDBACK THEY RECEIVE TO FUTURE WORK

Rather than limiting our feedback comments to correcting the specific piece of work that has just been undertaken, we can try to link more firmly to next steps and future tasks (Walker, 2009). It might be useful to think about similar tasks that the student might undertake in this or future modules and consider how this feedback might apply or be extended to those tasks. We might be able to focus some feedback on more generic skills such as specific processes associated with the assessment task (problem identification, literature review, flow-charts, etc), writing or specific types of writing (e.g. reports), thinking skills (analysis and evaluation), etc.

A challenge is to ensure that students see the value of these comments so it might be useful to specifically mention a future assignment where the comment would apply. We can also help students to: plan to take specific action, so the next assessment, or future task is at the forefront of their minds. For example, after returning the assignment with feedback to the students you could encourage them to engage with the feedback by getting them to write a paragraph on how they will improve in future work based on the feedback received here. Examples of tasks you could ask them to carry out include:

- A. Locate and summarise a useful resource on referencing,
- B. Identify a useful online resource outlining how to compose a good essay or commence a literature review, and share it with your lecturer and peers,
- C. Take stock of where they feel they need further assistance and seek help to improve their ability in this area.

5. ENCOURAGE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUR COMMENTS

Learning from feedback involves much more than simply receiving information – opportunities for action, change and interaction are also important as part of an overall process. It can be helpful, for instance, to offer students opportunities to discuss comments on their assignments, so they can clarify any misunderstandings and you can see how students are responding to your comments.

Other suggestions include getting students to think in advance of submission about what would best help them, perhaps by requesting the type of feedback they'd value most when they submit an assignment, or taking 10 minutes to undertake a self-evaluation activity just before they hand in an assignment. Asking students to self-assess, then targeting your comments on areas where their judgements differ from your expert evaluations, can be a powerful means of helping students better understand quality and gauge what actions they need to take in future (for further information see TACIT Guide 7 - Getting students to self-assess to deepen their learning and develop feedback dialogues).

Students often expect tutor comments to focus on 'telling,' 'correcting' and indicating where they went 'wrong'. The way we construct comments can help with this. For example, try to balance directions (corrections, commands and so on which explicitly point out specific changes to the text) with more facilitative comments framed as questions or suggestions, (observations designed to engage your student with the text). For instance, you could ask 'how does this point connect with your overall thesis?' 'What are the consequences of this way of approaching the issue?'

6. DISCUSS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR FEEDBACK

It may also be useful to explicitly discuss, in class, the multiple functions of feedback and clarify your purpose, so as to expand their view of what you hope your comments will achieve. For example, you might hope to generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks; to develop understanding via explanations; to highlight inter-connections; to enhance skills; to stimulate reflection and awareness of learning processes; to help students learn to evaluate their own work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

If we get it right and make feedback a vehicle for learning, we can make a real difference to students' achievements and morale. Equally, we can damage students' confidence and their willingness to keep trying if they don't perceive what we are saying as useful. Helping them understand that everything we say or write is directed towards enabling them to move forward positively is crucial.

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