

GETTING STUDENTS TO SELF ASSESS TO DEEPEN THEIR LEARNING, AND DEVELOP FEEDBACK DIALOGUES

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Many authors (including Nicol, 2010 and Carless, 2013) suggest that good feedback should always be a dialogue, not a monologue from tutors. Students can become very good at self-assessing their work, but usually don't have the opportunity to fine-tune their self-assessment and need feedback to help them on their way. If we just ask: 'try to work out what your mark or grade is?' they're likely to just guess, and then probably forget what they guessed. While some students might select a grade close to that which you gave them, studies show that 'high achievers' underestimate their abilities and the majority of under-achievers will overestimate their mark. Research shows (Clouder, Broughan, Jewell & Steventon, 2012) that this trend is retained across different nationalities but interestingly, students from different nationalities can also have different perspectives of their abilities. Therefore, we need to educate students about making assessment judgements against well-expressed criteria, just as we try to do when we assess their work.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

It's vital that students themselves have a very good idea how their learning is going (Sadler, 2013), and how well they're evidencing their achievement in the forms we require for assessment. When students can tell for themselves that they're falling short of expected standards, they can take appropriate action to catch up. When they find that they're already well ahead of where they need to be, they can reprioritise their time and energy toward other subjects which may need more attention. When students develop the skill to self-assess their work accurately before submitting it for our assessment, there should be no disappointing shocks when they find out how they've done. Moreover, we need to consider how well our students are prepared for dynamic future roles and an ability to self-evaluate and improve their own performance is a key skill that will help graduates advance in their chosen profession.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The suggestions below require us to spend some of our face-to-face time with whole classes on matters relating to assessment, rather than use the time giving them yet more content to get to grips with. Student feedback shows that they regard this face-to-face induction into self-assessment extremely valuable. Face-to-face, we have tone of voice, gesture, ability to respond to questions, and countless other variables at our disposal, as well as writing briefing notes in study guides or module handbooks. We can:

- **MAKE SURE THAT WE TALK A CLASS THROUGH THE INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES** relating to a coursework assignment, and illustrate how the assessment criteria will be used when we assess their work.
- **SHOW A CLASS A RANGE OF GOOD, POOR AND 'IN-BETWEEN' EXAMPLES** of responses to similar assignments, and let them see how the assessment criteria may be used to grade these examples.
- **GET A CLASS OF STUDENTS THEMSELVES TO GRADE THREE ASSIGNMENTS, SIMILAR TO THE ONE THEY ARE ABOUT TO TAKE**, including a good one, a poor one and so on, and ask students what are the differences they notice between the respective samples.
- **FOLLOW THIS BY ASKING STUDENTS THEMSELVES TO WORK OUT SUITABLE CRITERIA** for judging the examples they have seen, and indeed to collectively work out a set of criteria for assessing their own future work in the assessment format being considered.
- **ASK STUDENTS, WHEN THEY SUBMIT THEIR OWN WORK, TO FILL IN A GRID WHERE THEY RATE THEIR OWN** achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria on a scale 'fully met', 'partially met' and 'not well met'. This can help us mark their work, in the knowledge of how well the students themselves felt they had done and we can give feedback in a much more focused way.

- **REQUIRE STUDENTS TO SUBMIT THEIR RESPONSES TO A SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE WITH THEIR ASSIGNMENTS**, where they reflect briefly on their submission and answer questions such as:
 - What do you think the best aspect of this assignment is?
 - What (if anything) did you struggle with in this assignment?
 - What would you expect your mark or grade to be for this assignment?
 - What do you think might have helped you to get a higher mark or grade?
 - If you'd had another two hours, what might you have improved?

We can then respond briefly to students alongside their comments as we assess the work, but now knowing 'where the student was coming from' in much more detail, thereby making our feedback more helpful. This can help us to speed up our assessment, as we are armed with at least some detail of how well the students think they have done.

This also means that we can avoid telling students about faults they already know about, but rather suggest how they might address such faults. Similarly, it would do little good to tell a student their work was 'excellent' if they already knew it was but what could be more helpful would be to tell them (for example) 'What I really like about this work is the way you ...', so that they have positive feedback they can build on, or try to earn again.

- **CHECK QUICKLY IN THE LECTURE, WITH A COHORT OF STUDENTS HOW USEFUL THEY FOUND OUR FEEDBACK ON THEIR SELF-ASSESSMENT.** For example, 'raise two hands you learned a lot from this', '...one hand if you learned a little from this', 'hands-on-head if this was no use to you' and so on.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The more we can foster autonomous behaviour in students, the better they are likely to perform in assessed tasks. We want them to be confident about the quality of the work they submit, even if this means them knowing what they could have done better had circumstances and timescales permitted. The best way to achieve this level of self-efficacy is through holding productive conversations with them to help them build their evaluative capacities. Collectively, the processes listed above can help to train students in how assessment actually works, and how to estimate their own progress in time to improve (where necessary) their assignments.

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