**The importance of giving good feedback**

**From Chapter 8, Brown, S. (2015) Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Higher Education: Global perspectives, Palgrave**

Concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not understand the rules of the higher education game. The time we spend on giving detailed and developmental formative and summative feedback should not be skimped: this is crucial to foster student learning and is the most time-consuming aspect of assessment but arguably the most important thing we do for learners.

Formative and summative assessment perform different functions and work in different ways. I suggest that formative assessment forms and informs, and is primarily concerned with giving feedback that is aimed at prompting improvement in student work. It is often continuous and usually involves plenty of words. Summative assessment is concerned with summing up and making evaluative judgments, is often end-point and involves numbers and grades rather than words. Purists argue that they work best without overlap, but in my view there can be an element of hybridity. For example, a poor exam mark is principally summative in nature, but a poor grade can give students some formative information, by implying whether this is an area of study with which to continue (either because it is so poor there is little merit in continuing, or by showing an area of weakness where improvement is essential for success in other areas, like statistics for psychologists or live drawing for sculptors).

Sadler, the most cited author on formative assessment suggests that we need to:

‘provide the means by which students can develop a concept of quality that is similar in essence to that which the teacher possesses, and in particular to understand what makes for high quality…Students need to be exposed to, and gain experience in making judgements about, a variety of works of different quality... They need planned rather than random exposure to exemplars, and experience in making judgements about quality. They need to create verbalised rationales and accounts of how various works could have been done better. Finally, they need to engage in evaluative conversations with teachers and other students.’ (Sadler 2010)

To have best effect, he argues, this understanding should develop during the production of the work, rather than much later, once the work has been handed in and the grade awarded. In an ideal world, what many students would like best would be for us to sit alongside them and talk them through their assessed work over an extended period of time so that they can gauge whether their work is of the right standard and comprehend what they need to do to improve it. However, this is only really possible within an elite, highly resourced higher education system, and only a tiny minority of academics work in one of these. Where this is not possible, it is incumbent upon us, I would suggest, to give as much feedback as we can, which is supportive and developmental in quality, and ensure they receive it as fast as possible.

National student evaluation systems of the kinds used in the UK, Australia and elsewhere indicate that what students really hate about feedback is:

* Poorly written comments that are nigh on impossible to decode, especially when impenetrable acronyms or abbreviations are used, or where handwriting is in an unfamiliar alphabet and is illegible;
* Cursory and derogatory remarks that leave them feeling demoralised ‘Weak argument’, ‘Shoddy work’, ‘Hopeless’, ‘Under-developed’, and so on;
* Value judgments on them as people rather than on the work in hand;
* Vague comments which give few hints on how to improve or remediate errors; ‘OK as far as it goes’, ‘Needs greater depth of argument’, ‘Inappropriate methodology used’, ‘Not written at the right level’;
* Feedback that arrives so late that there are no opportunities to put into practice any guidance suggested in time for the submission of the next assignment.

Therefore good feedback:

* Is dialogic, rather than mono-directional, giving students chances to respond to comments from their markers and seek clarification where necessary.
* Helps clarify what good work looks like, so students are really clear about goals, criteria and expected standards, and provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance (Sadler, 2010, *op cit*);
* Actively facilitates students reviewing their own work and reflecting on it, so that they become good judges of the quality of their own work;
* Doesn’t just correct errors and indicate problems, potentially leaving students discouraged and demotivated, but also highlights good work and encourages them to believe they can improve and succeed;
* Delivers high quality information to students about their achievements to date and how they can improve their future work. Where there are errors, students should be able to see what needs to be done to remediate them, and where they are undershooting in terms of achievement, they should be able to perceive how to make their work even better;
* Offers ‘feed-forward’ aiming to ‘increase the value of feedback to the students by focusing comments not only on the past and present…but also on the future – what the student might aim to do, or do differently in the next assignment or assessment if they are to continue to do well or to do better’ (Hounsell, 2008, p. 5).
* Ensures that the mark isn’t the only thing that students take note of when work is returned, but that they are encouraged to read and use the advice given in feedback and apply it to future assignments.

Students working in professional contexts are particularly reliant on good feedback from placement or workplace supervisors as well as from their tutors, since they are often working day-to-day with live clients or end-users, who experience the students’ developing competence and autonomy at first hand. Where it is well-designed, feedback can provide a bridge between current practice and advanced work, potentially, leading to progressive and incremental advances in capability.

**Encouraging students to use feedback well**

Once we have spent time on giving students feedback, it is a sad waste if students don’t make good use of it. We need to explore ways to incentivise reading and using of feedback since students often don’t bother, just looking at the mark given. This can be wasteful of staff effort and a missed opportunity for students who may need support to understand that the comments are not just judgments, but, in the best cases, aiming to provide developmental guidance on how to improve their future submissions (*feed-forward*). Using audio feedback as described above can be very helpful: the Sounds Good project (*op cit*) indicated that students will listen to audio feedback between one and seventeen times, since it has to be listened to in order for the student to get the mark at the end of the comments, whereas they often did not read written feedback at all. Other tutors provide feedback by email without a grade attached and students are required to read the comments and then estimate the mark which they then email back to their tutors, who awards some extra marks to students who have come within five marks of the original number as a reward for good self-evaluation.

Students who perceive that academics are working hard to ensure that they benefit from thoughtful and just feedback are likely to respond in kind to the student-centred environment if they see it as nurturing and developmental.