Assessment - Providing Feedback and Marking

‘Nothing that we do to, or for, our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. The results of our assessment influence our students for the rest of their lives and careers – fine if we get it right, but unthinkable if we get it wrong.’

(Race, Brown and Smith (2005), 500 Tips on Assessment)

Assessment processes and methods should be valid, reliable, consistent, efficient, transparent and easy to understand. Most importantly, they should provide a vehicle for student learning strategy. In other words, they should provide pedagogically constructive and effective feedback to students.

So why do we assess? The main reasons are as follows:

- To determine that the learning outcomes of the module are being achieved
- To provide feedback to students on their learning, enabling them to improve their performance
- To motivate students to undertake appropriate work and plan their learning strategy effectively
- To support and guide learning and research
- To demonstrate that appropriate academic standards are being maintained
- To evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and teaching support

All feedback should focus on its formative function. Formative feedback is essential if effective learning is to take place. Students need to know how well or how poorly their learning is evolving. They want to know where they might be going wrong, in what ways and what aspects of their learning could be improved. Feedback can also motivate students by reassuring them when they are correct, where they might be doing particularly well and how to develop further in those areas. Baume1 puts forward the idea of a “Feedback Sandwich” to motivate students: start with the good news, then tell them the bad news in a positive and constructive way, and end on an upbeat, encouraging note.

Providing feedback on written assignments

In order to provide useful and meaningful feedback to students it is crucial to understand in all respects:

- the pedagogical aim of assessments of the module
- what the assessment criteria are, and how they are implemented
- how grades and marks are reached

It is important to recognise that feedback is a dialogue, a two-way process. Whether given formally, in writing, in response to a particular assignment or task, in the classroom, in personal tutorials or even in more informal meetings with students, effective communication is essential if feedback is to be easily understood, absorbed and used to improve future performance in the context of the student’s learning strategy.

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Providing effective, easily understood and timely feedback is a national and institutional priority – to improve student satisfaction and to maximise student achievement.

For it to be of positive value, feedback needs to be:

**Constructive**
Feedback should focus on the positive as well as 'areas for improvement' in order to be encouraging and motivational rather than destructive.

**Timely**
For it to be useful, feedback needs to occur at the appropriate point in the learning cycle. Feedback has, as previously iterated, a very important formative function.

**Prompt**
If feedback is not prompt, students may lose the thread of what was required in the assessment and move on.

**Supportive of learning**
Feedback should clarify to a student where he/she is in his/her learning in relation to intended learning outcomes, what remains to be achieved and be given indications on how to achieve those objectives.

**Focused**
Student achievement should be the focus of feedback, not effort. Remember that it is the work that is being assessed, not the student!

**Efficient**
Feedback needs to be delivered in a way that is manageable to everyone involved. Arranging individual tutorials for every student is simply unrealistic in many contexts – but following the return of work, using part of a lecture or seminar to review a recent assessment, summarising some of the strengths shown by the work as well as common mistakes or misunderstandings can be very productive and helpful.

If in doubt at any stage of the assessment process, ask for further advice from a mentor or colleague in your Department or consult Academic Teaching Development.

**Marking written work**
Marking written work can be a time-consuming and nerve-wracking task, especially for new teaching staff. The support from peers, mentors, Department and Academic Teaching Development can be very useful, especially when marking work for the first time or for an unfamiliar module.

The following advice may be of help to you.

1. **Even before setting the module assignments, make sure that**
   - you and the students know exactly what the expectations for the assignment are
   - students know what the marking criteria are, and what they mean

   The criteria should give guidance about what constitutes a particular grade/percentage. Ask a mentor or colleague in your Department for clarification should you need it.

2. **Look at the ways in which colleagues in your Department mark and give feedback on similar assignments, using the same criteria.**

3. **Check whether the assignments will be second marked, check marked, or moderated; make sure that students know that any mark you may give is provisional and subject to the usual procedures of second marking and external examining.**
4. First, read through the assignments briefly to get a sense of the range of responses and the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of the batch.

5. Then take one assignment at a time, and mark against the criteria. For more problematic assignments, apply a ‘best fit’ principle - within which grade band does this assignment fit best? You can finalise the mark later.

6. When assessing online, type your initial comments on a computer before you finalise your observations and put them online. Keep an organised record of your feedback. You may need to refer your comments at a later date to assess and monitor the progress of your student. Remember that feedback is part of your dialogue with your students.

7. Depending on the size of the batch of assignments, give yourself appropriate breaks to rest your eyes and brain. Give also yourself time to look back and check that your approach to marking is consistent with the way in which you started marking (this is especially useful if you are marking over a few days).

8. When you’ve finished your provisional marking, put the assignments in rank order, from best to worst according to the marks you have given. Compare assignments with similar marks – do they still seem similar? Adjust marks accordingly where you feel you need to do so.

9. Use the full range of marks: if you have work which is very poor and/or excellent, that should be reflected in your marking.

10. As stated earlier, make sure that when you give feedback you start with a positive, encouraging comment. Then give specific guidance about what the student could do next time to raise their grade. You can also ask the student what strategies he/she will adopt to rectify any weaknesses. Finally, end with a positive, upbeat and encouraging comment. This should help prevent students from feeling negative about their marks.
Useful links


http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id432_using_feedback.pdf – article form Phil Race looking at many aspects of giving feedback to students.


http://itdl.org/Journal/Jul_04/article06.htm – a journal article by Jason Huett, University of North Texas, which discusses the use of email as a tool for giving feedback to students.


Further readings


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