Feedback and reporting

Feedback can be given in a number of ways and does not need to be limited to formal written comments on formally presented assessment items. For example in the case of group work that may take place over an entire semester or year, groups can give regular presentations on their progress or provide mini progress reports. Short in-class presentations can be used for assessment and have the added bonus of providing instant feedback on a number of areas such as:

- oral communication skills
- conceptual understanding of an issue or topic
- ability to read and to respond critically to set literature or literature they have researched
- ability to sustain an argument
- group skills through the level of group contribution and creativity towards the assessment task.

What students expect

Students expect feedback on their work because it helps them to improve and provides hints so that they don’t repeat mistakes in the future. Quality feedback is a reflection of quality teaching, accountability and transparency. We expect students to hand work in on time and they expect us to promptly and professionally assess and return their work. Students expect feedback to provide:

- evidence of clear criteria upon which their work was assessed, evaluated and reported back (a succinct marking criteria will help here)
- detailed and relevant comments that relate to the specific aspects of their work (for example strengths and weaknesses)
- comments that guide students to improved performances in the future.

Students benefit the most when the feedback is:

- **Constructive**, which means in addition to noting the strengths and weaknesses of the work in the assessment task, it provides reinforcement, guidance and useful information on how the student could improve the quality of their work. Focus is on improvement. Avoid broad sweeping comments that give little guidance or knowledge of their performance.
- **Timely** such that it is assessed while still fresh in the student’s mind and ideally before the student moves on to the next task. Feedback is useless if it comes after the semester has finished or too far away from the submission date. Remember that sometimes students wait for feedback before proceeding onto their next tasks, it also gives confidence to proceed.
- **Meaningful** so they may enhance their performance for subsequent work. The feedback should also be specific and relevant to the task, the outcomes and the student.
- **Focused** on the most important aspects that will give most learning benefit. Provide both positive and negative instructional advice. It should build on past
learning, understandings or abilities, and encourage further development. Should also be linked to outcomes and formative and summative assessments

- **Justifiable** and defendable, so should allow ownership of the comments or judgments within the context of the learning environment. It should be fair, consistent and unbiased.
- **Respectful**, kindly and considerate. Feedback should be provided that shows an awareness of student strengths and weaknesses, concerns, needs, and personality.

Feedback that matches these points encourages students to think critically and reflect upon their work and potentially how they can improve it. It should also provide support and encouragement. Within the group context, it can promote positive discussions between group members on the achievement of learning outcomes. Generally, positive and open feedback enhances the learning process through discussion between you and your students.

**Giving feedback**

- Start with a positive comment.
- Provide comments on specific weaknesses in the work.
- Offer guidance on how to correct or improve the weaknesses.
- Comment upon and reinforce new or creative ideas.
- Conclude with an encouraging summary.
- If necessary provide both written and oral feedback.

Develop these skills in students when giving feedback to peers.

**Feedback for assessment and/or evaluation purposes**

O’Hara and Weber (2005) discuss the need for ensuring that time is taken at the beginning of the group work activity to discuss how to provide constructive feedback, as for many students giving feedback about their fellow team mates and receiving feedback may cause anxiety. To assist them in doing this they provide the following guidelines that will be useful to students:

- Describe rather than judge or interpret the behaviour that was observed.
- Be specific rather than general.
- Take into account the needs of the receiver of the feedback (considering their emotional state and ability to receive the information) as well as the needs of the giver (by considering motives in providing feedback).
- Direct the feedback at behaviour that is controllable; otherwise it is counterproductive and increases frustration.
- Check if the feedback is welcomed rather than merely imposing it.
- Consider the timing of the feedback, although most appropriate at the earliest opportunity, readiness for the feedback and the context e.g. presence of others needs to be taken into account.
- Check that the receiver has correctly understood the feedback.
- Give feedback in a tentative and non-dogmatic manner.
- Check that others concur with what has been said.
While the above relate specifically to giving feedback it is important to stress the need to show respect for, and act with integrity towards other students. It needs to be stressed to students that differences of opinion will occur within their groups. However, it is important to keep these differences in perspective and not to allow them to degenerate into personal attacks.

Allow time at the beginning of the semester and at the start of the group work activity for students to clarify what is required of them, and how they should approach assessing or evaluating either themselves or their peers.

**Reporting**

Reporting your feedback back to students is very important. Reporting is the process of communicating information about student achievement and progress gained from the assessment process. The purpose of reporting is to support learning and teaching by providing feedback to students. Students' learning achievements and progress may also be reported to employers. Information about students' achievements may also be valuable for teacher and systemic wide planning and reporting.

Reporting back to students can be done via formal or informal methods. In the main if the feedback is being given as part of an assessment process then detailed written feedback should provide students with a report on their level of achievement of the learning outcomes related to the task. The marking criteria (and/or well developed grade descriptors) can be of great assistance in developing a written report which provides students with relevant and accurate feedback on their performances and achievements.