Feedback to Students

What is "feedback"?

The concept of "feedback" is commonly used in communication theory and physiology. It informs the sender if the sent message is well received. It also provides the necessary information for refinement and revision, both during and after the process. When applied in teaching, it is always used to denote the teacher-to-student or student-to-teacher communication. Here we shall confine our discussion to teacher-to-student feedback.

Teacher-to-student feedback is information students can use to develop their ability to think critically, to enhance their understanding and improve their performance. Feedback is an indispensable component of the teaching-learning process that helps to ensure that learning has taken place. It is a critical educational tool.

To some teachers and students, feedback is limited to the provision of a score, mark or grade on a piece of written work or for a performance. In general, most students find that such global forms of written feedback, in isolation, do little to assist their learning, motivate them, or contribute positively to the learning environment. A score of 'C-' does not tell the student exactly how s/he is doing and what to do about any weak areas. In the same way, a cross at the margin is discouraging and uninformative.

Effective teacher-to-student feedback is informative, carefully planned and delivered, adequate and timely. In the following, we shall outline the differences between written and verbal feedback and discuss how to give effective feedback to students. Four sample feedback reports that depict different devices to give feedback to students are enclosed for your reference.

Written and Verbal Feedback

Feedback can take various forms, including spoken words, written comments, images and graphics, even body language. It can be formal or informal, one-shot or on-going. Informal ongoing feedback between instructor and student during class is just as important as formal and systematic written feedback related to the final grades.

The following chart outlines the differences between written and verbal feedback:

	Written Feedback	Verbal Feedback
Response	May be delayed. Does not include non-verbal, e.g. tone of voice, facial expression, body language etc.	Immediate. Normally interactive. Speaker can monitor response and adopt different approaches. May include non-verbal.
Record	Permanent, legal record.	Usually no record, except with audio/videotape.
Place	Sender and receiver need not be in same place.	Sender and receiver need to be in same place or time e.g. face-to-face, telephone, teleconferencing.
Detail	Can be very detailed.	Usually less detailed.
Privacy	May be very private.	May be very private except feedback to a group.
Time in preparation	Usually high for drafting and editing.	Varies. Usually low.

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	Written Feedback	**Verbal Feedback**
Time to receive feedback	Shorter. Reading takes less time than listening.	Usually longer.
Relationship	May be impersonal.	May build individual relationships.
Control of message	Writer does not control, if, when and how thoroughly message will be read.	Speaker controls when and how thoroughly message will be heard. But it is hard for
	But the permanent record serves as an aid to interpretation of and reflection on the message.	the listener to reflect accurately on-the-spot.

Effective Feedback

Effective feedback, in either form,
- explains clearly and precisely the principal strengths and weaknesses of a student's performance;
- provides helpful guidance on how to improve;
- reinforces effective learning;
- motivates students to learn;
- is positive in tone ;
- is prompt;
- is audience-oriented and
- is effectively communicated.

As for summative purposes of grading, progression, level of award, etc. the feedback has to indicate the student's achievement, performance and progress in relation to set criteria or expected standards, or their achievement relative to that of other students in the same class or at the same level. Students have to be informed ahead of time about 'the rules of the game' so that assessment can be both valid and fair.

Conditions for Giving Feedback

Boyle and Lo identified nine conditions for giving feedback in college teaching:

1. All feedback, particularly scores and grades should be accurate, consistent and fair. That is, they should have high validity and reliability.

2. Feedback should be prompt and helpful. It should be critical but only in a constructive sense. Personal attack, including the use of sarcasm should be avoided.

3. Behaviors or qualities that can be observed or reliably judged, rather than inferences about possible causes should form the basis of the feedback.

4. Focus should be on things that individual can change and that are relevant to desirable learning or performance.

5. Comments should be specific, rather than vague and general.

6. Wherever possible, emphasis should be placed on strengths.

7. Care should be taken to ensure that the receiver will understand the feedback so that he or she knows what to do to change.

8. If appropriate and possible, the feedback should identify further learning opportunities and assessment activities, such as tutorials, revision assignments or second-chance tests.

9. Summary assessment reports may be useful to communicate to students the strengths and weakness of the work done by their class or cohort as a whole and how future work could be improved.

Helpful hints for giving constructive feedback to students

Suggestions from Race and Brown:

- Plan and organize your feedback. Try to start and finish with something positive.

- Put students at ease. Help them to receive the feedback in a calm, objective way.

- A grade or score can always dominate students' reactions. Students who are "grade conscious" tend to ignore the feedback if the grade is as good or better than they expected; if the grade is lower than the student expected, feedback tends to be regarded merely as a justification of the grade—and not as a learning tool. Decide whether the score is important or whether it would be better to give feedback without a score. Another possibility would be to separate the feedback for improvement from the grade and give them out at different times. For example, one might distribute answer keys immediately after a test.

- Where longer feedback comments and explanations are needed, prepare a separate feedback sheet with numbered points referring to identified parts of the marked work. A more structured way of giving more detailed feedback is to prepare assignment-return sheets listing the assessment criteria, giving these sheets out when setting the assignment, and returning them completed with your comments with the marked assignment. (Please refer to Samples 1 & 2)

- Check for understanding during verbal interaction.

- Think carefully about whether to give particular sorts of verbal feedback to students individually, or in groups. Some students may feel embarrassed when they receive feedback(either positive or critical) in a group situation. It is probably safer to use group situations for more general feedback (for example, discussing common misconceptions or errors) and to save highly specific feedback for one-to-one oral or written comments.

- Prepare model answers (e.g. sample good answers/products, audio or video tapes, special references, demonstration, etc.) to questions and assignments. Link particular comments on individual assignments to the model answers. (This can save time in repeating common difficulties. Please refer to Sample 3.)

- In written feedback, use phrases such as 'good point', 'well done', 'nicely put' to replace ticks besides correct answers or ideas.

- Avoid using crosses, question marks or other rather vague symbols in written feedback. Use fluorescent highlighter pen to mark incorrect phrases or words in scripts with margin notes or footnotes for explanation.

- For large class, it is impossible to mark a large pile of scripts straight away. Issue model answers and commentaries immediately after students hand in their work for assessment. This gives them instant general feedback and you can then prepare particular feedback with less urgency.

References

Boyle, Pat & Lo, Tracy, *Feedback & Assessment, Suggestions for Good Practice*. Professional Development Unit, Educational Technology Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic.

Munter, Mary. *Business Communication, Strategy and Skill.* Prentice Hall, Inc. 1987.

Race, Phil & Brown, Sally. *500 Tips for Tutors.* Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Series. Kogan Page Limited, 1993.

Sample Feedback Reports

(Source: *Feedback & Assessment* by Boyle & Lo)

These samples are presented to stimulate interest and adoption. They are of the more formal and systematic type.

Sample 1   Assignment Evaluation and Feedback (with criteria for assessment on a 4-points scale)

Sample 2   Feedback Checklist

Sample 3   Feedback Report (with statistics of the class performance and common errors/major faults of students' writing)

Sample 4   Practical Test Assessment Report

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