

Chapter 2

Assessment for Learning: Feeding Back and Feeding Forward

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ABSTRACT

To support students, make effective use of feedback to improve their learning, this chapter provides practical tips and strategies for teachers to stimulate their students' interest in feedback, assimilate its significant role and get involved in interpreting, reflecting and acting upon feedback comments. The author focuses on both summative and formative feedback. For summative feedback, one's concern is to encourage students to interpret grades/marks, reflect upon them and transform them into plans and actions. This is through using reflective worksheets and other post-exam tasks in class which are designed by the author. Feedback within self, peer and group assessment approaches is also concerned in this chapter. Other kinds of reflective worksheets are suggested to be used to reflect on the student learning process as part of the student portfolio, journal or set separately, in addition to the use of technology, i.e., class blogs to enhance such reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment as an educational practice plays an important role in shaping students' future. Its washback may contribute to building up their beliefs and attitudes towards learning thereby acting either as a driving engine that pushes students towards success, or as a demotivating source which impedes their progress. Yet, within pedagogy for autonomy assessment is considered not only as a tool for measuring learners' achievement, but also improving the quality of their learning. Within such culture, students are active agents in the assessment process who make judgments about their own work and that of others, monitor their progress and make decisions to improve.

Feedback is an important component of the assessment process upon which students learning can be enhanced. It reflects how much learning has been achieved thus indicating the effectiveness and efficiency of the teaching process. Nevertheless, within traditional assessment contexts where the focus is on testing knowledge and comprehension at the end of a given course, feedback remains limited to marks

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or grades which might not mirror students' process and progress in learning. Yet, with the increasing need to promote an assessment for learning culture in higher education feedback's goals and processes need to go beyond grading practices to support the development of student autonomy. In such contexts, both self-assessment (internal feedback) and teacher feedback (external feedback) should help achieve this objective.

In fact, it is necessary for students to process their teacher feedback to understand their mistakes, reflect on their learning needs and take actions to improve it. Whether it is reflecting negative or positive comments, feedback need not be viewed as an end in itself referring to passing or failing. Rather, it should be considered a source of learning and making progress. Therefore, to help students get that potential, this chapter suggests teaching ideas and strategies that aim to encourage students interpret their teacher's feedback and act to close the learning gap. But, before introducing them there is a need to clarify for teachers what feedback and quality feedback mean to make from assessment practices more effective.

A DEFINITION OF FEEDBACK

In fact, feedback can be defined from various perspectives. For Hattie and Timperley (2007), it refers to "information provided by an agent with respect to one's performance or understanding" (p.81). However, feedback can include the consequences of performance since "a teacher or parent can provide corrective information, a peer can provide an alternative strategy, a book can provide information to clarify ideas, a parent can provide encouragement, and a learner can look up the answer to evaluate the correctness of a response (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p.81). Moreover, feedback needs to serve other purposes as Philpott (2009) explains:

Feedback is the information communicated to a student in regard to their understanding of shared learning objectives of a given task against an agreed set of criteria. This information will include guidance on how to improve. Feedback is the information that is relayed to the student about their progress and can be based upon a variety of forms of evidence including: marked work, un-graded teacher checked worked, oral contribution, practical displays, draft work and re-drafted work. (Philpott, 2009, pp. 73-74)

It follows from this definition that, providing feedback does not mean only telling students about their learning performance, thereby revealing their progress on the basis of collected evidence, but it also includes communicating and clarifying assessment criteria and learning objectives of a given task. In this respect, Brown and Knight (1994) claim that "worthwhile feedback is related to the clarity of assessment criteria" (p. 114). Besides, feedback needs to show to students what is required from them to improve their actual performance as Ramaprasad (1983) definition of feedback indicates: "Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter to alter the gap in some way" (p.04).

It is worth noting, however, that feedback does not only concern students' performance. Teachers as well need to obtain feedback from their colleagues and students about their teaching, in order to improve it and enhance students' learning. This is through engaging in what Stanley (1999) labels 'reflective dialogue' as he states: "a reflective and investigative dialogue with another person who listened well and asked important questions helped teachers to re-shape the quality of their own inner dialogue" (p.119).

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