Giving effective feedback

Feedback is information about a student’s learning or performance which they can use in future work. Effective feedback has a powerful influence on learning. This resource gives three important questions to think about when composing feedback, followed by some ideas for effective face-to-face feedback.

1 What are the strengths of this work?

Commenting on strengths is very helpful for students – if they know what they are doing well, they can keep doing these things. If you are teaching the student over a period of time, you could point out how they have progressed or improved.

Make your comments on the strengths of the work very specific – for example ‘paragraph 2 was well-structured’ or ‘your reasoning was well laid out’. General comments such as ‘good work’ can be difficult for students to interpret – which part of the work was especially good?

It’s vital to focus on the work, not the student’s personal strengths. ‘Person’ comments such as ‘intelligent work’ or ‘you are an excellent writer’ can lead students up to think rigidly about their abilities. They may become more concerned with keeping up appearances as ‘an excellent writer’ than taking intellectually valuable risks.

2 What is holding this work back?

When reading work, many limitations or issues may come to mind. It is important to hone in on the most important issues which really limit the overall quality of the work. If we point out everything that could be improved, students may become overwhelmed and/or demotivated – they may not have the experience and skills to prioritise. Equally, we shouldn’t ignore thorny but crucial issues which may prevent a student from progressing. You may wish to combine comments with face-to-face feedback, where possible.

When commenting on weaknesses or limitations, try to avoid overly negative terms (‘awful’, ‘shocking’, ‘dire’), and ambiguous annotations such as ‘!’ or ‘??????’. Explain where the issue occurs and why it is problematic – this may not be apparent to the student.
What one or two steps would make the most difference to the student's next piece of work?

To follow up on question 2, identify one or two actions which would help the student to progress in future work. Ensure that these actions are realistic, and check in person that the student knows how to go about them – sometimes suggestions are not as obvious as we might assume.

Giving just a couple of recommendations is more realistic than a long list, and it’s also easier for you to keep track of whether the student has taken up your advice in their next piece of work.

Face-to-face or verbal feedback

Building on the questions above, here are some ideas for effective face-to-face verbal feedback, whether in a lab, tutorial or class setting.

- Try to make feedback a two-way conversation. It’s easy to slip into delivery mode, particularly when you have lots to say and are pressed for time. Listening to the student’s own assessment and reflections of the work can give you useful insights into their thinking. Dialogues can also prevent misconceptions. Ask the student whether your feedback is what they expected, and encourage them to pose questions.

- In face-to-face feedback, it’s particularly important to select a manageable number of suggestions to talk about – otherwise, students may struggle to remember the key points, and/or to prioritise. For a lab report or tutorial essay, three may be enough; more may be necessary for longer work such as a thesis/dissertation chapter or extensive problem set.

- Try to pick out and explain a specific example for each of your comments, so the student can relate the key messages to parts of their work.

- Be encouraging, but ensure praise is genuine and focussed on the strengths of the work. It is important for students to know what to continue doing.

- Close the feedback conversation by asking what the student is going to do as a result of your conversation. This is a chance to check their understanding and that they know what to do next.

- Give the student the opportunity to make notes, and to follow up with you if something comes to mind later. This is especially important for students with some disabilities, and for students with English as an additional language.

- If you are also giving written comments, give the student time to read through these and ask for any further clarifications.