



Give Written Feedback

Dr Alan Stone

Written feedback is given following assignments with the intention of closing the gap between the achieved standard and the desired standard. It has long been recognised as one of the main catalysts for effective learning. (Boehler 2006)

Teachers should not only provide ideas, detailed and constructive feedback; they should ensure that their learners engage with it.

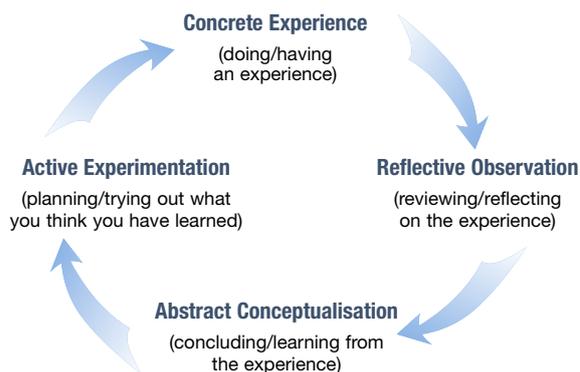
Effective feedback enables us to provide learners with information about their performance, their knowledge, skills or attitudes to enable them to improve.

Background

Feedback is one of the most important influences on student achievement¹ yet students may often feel dissatisfied with the quality and or the quantity of feedback they receive following assessments. Feedback allows a student to reflect on what they have learnt and what they need to change in order to improve.² In the absence of effective feedback, learners are left to rely on their own self-assessment of their abilities – which are known to be unreliable.³ A useful way for a student to organise their thoughts is to use Kolb's reflective cycle – see diagram Fig. 1. This allows a student to plan for future learning based on the lessons learnt from previous experience.

Figure 1

Reflective Cycle – adapted from Kolb and Fry (1975).



Improving the Student Experience

In order to benefit from feedback the student must know;

- ▶ what good performance entails,
- ▶ how their current performance compares with that good performance
- ▶ how to close the gap between current performance and the good performance

Feedback should be delivered in a clear and understandable format that students appreciate and that does not deter them from using it as a valuable learning tool.⁴

Feedback seems to work better when it encourages an open dialogue between the teacher and the student.⁵

Guidance

Students dislike pre-defined statements or tick boxes and find them less useful for learning. The feedback comments should be individual to that particular student.

Feedback should be constructive. It should define not only what was done incorrectly but how to improve it.

There should be a balance between positive and negative comments. Students should know what they did well too. Comments like "good" need expanding on – which part was good and why?

Comments should not be harmful to student self-esteem. Some students are overly sensitive to criticism and once hurt will show avoidance behaviours for future feedback.

After reading the tutor comments the student needs to have a clear idea about what they did well and what they need to do to improve.

Use clear language and avoid jargon and acronyms. If something written was incorrect it is likely that this was because the student has failed to understand the basic concepts and needs these explaining.

Even the most able students are able to improve following feedback. Just because they did well doesn't mean that they don't need feedback.

Focus on the key learning messages related to the learning outcomes of the assignment without getting too side-tracked on less relevant learning outcomes such as grammar and spelling.

Give feedback in close time proximity to the examination before the student's thoughts and efforts have moved elsewhere.⁴

Written feedback always runs the risk of being a sermon – a "fire and forget" missile. Once dispatched by the tutor it can be uncertain whether it hits the target or achieves the desired consequences. Provide your contact details when giving written feedback so that the student has the opportunity of responding and engaging in a discourse about points in the feedback that were not understood.⁶ Provided it is made clear at the outset that the point of the dialogue is to improve future performance and not to alter grades then this should prevent the exchange developing at cross purposes.

Less able students who have failed or who are borderline need very detailed guidance about where they went wrong. They will need to know how they lost so many marks and what they will need to do differently next time. It may be better for a teacher to provide elaborations through personal instruction than to provide feedback on the concepts that were poorly understood in the first place. Repeated critical feedback can have a negative effect, especially on less successful students and perpetuate the cycle of underachievement (Hattie and Timperley 2007).

7 Principles of Good Feedback

1. Helps clarify good performance
2. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning
4. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
5. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching

(Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006)

Final Thoughts

Feedback is an essential component of the assessment process and can prove an invaluable tool in formative and summative activities. The motivational impact of well-constructed educationally sound feedback can serve to promote learning, improve self-belief and increase experimentation in the student. Medical Educators have a responsibility to provide constructive, clear and specific feedback to enable students to develop as self-directed and motivated learners.

Further Information

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