HOW TO GIVE QUALITY FEEDBACK

Learning through dialogue

Contents

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Foreword

This guide looks at feedback to students from lecturers, tutors and peers — about their performance on assessable learning tasks and about their learning in general. Feedback is consistently the worst performing scale on the Course Experience Questionnaire and in Macquarie University internal student surveys. There is some contention that students do not notice that lecturers are giving feedback and, conversely, that lecturers are not sufficiently explicit when giving feedback to students. Students complain that they don't get enough feedback and lecturers complain that students don't pick up the assignments that they have slaved over writing detailed comments! What can we do?

We canvassed the ideas and concerns of students and academics through interviews and have done an extensive literature review. Students held strong views on feedback.

All assessment is good if we get good feedback. If we don't it's useless.

Students also mentioned the strong emotional reactions — both positive and negative — that feedback produced. Good feedback encourages them and makes them feel appreciated, while poor feedback can simply lead to frustration. A few typical reactions were:

[Sometimes] they give you a whole letter written … It's good. It makes you feel like the person's actually doing their job and reading [your work].

Just the marks — its rubbish! You put in all this effort and all this work and then they just give you … "Oh, here's your mark". I don't like that!

High quality, timely feedback on learning tasks requires good planning and procedures so that the students' work gets submitted, marked and returned quickly and effectively. In this booklet we discuss ways to organise feedback. We consider the form of the feedback, the type of feedback and offer practical hints to improve feedback.

Feedback is not only for assessment. Constructive feedback helps motivate and engage students in their learning. It encourages them to develop the skills to self-assess and to critically analyse their own work as well as the work of others.

We know our job is done when students no longer need our feedback! But until then, here is a guide to help you design effective and efficient feedback for your students.

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This guide has been produced as one of a series in the Learning Excellence and Development (LEAD) program. The program brings together both general and academic staff from across Macquarie University as part of a team to enhance student learning. To find out more about the LEAD program, or to take a look at other guides in the series, go to www.mq.edu.au/businessandeconomics/lt.

The importance of
FEEDBACK

Universities can be strange and alienating places, particularly for those just out of the smaller world of a high school or, harder still, from another country. Large classes can compound the problem, sometimes leaving individual students in a situation where their only contact with the lecturer may be via an anonymous mark on a returned assignment when half the course they are studying has already been completed. Your students need your active guidance, via a steady stream of feedback from the beginning of their course. Without significant interaction with you they may not realise what is required of them, or go down a false path. This will limit the amount they learn, and could even cause them to fail. The education theorist Paul Ramsden reports that:

[An] investigation of first year engineering students in Scottish higher education … showed that an important contributory cause of student failure was an almost complete absence of feedback on progress during the first term of their studies. Some students only realised they were in danger of failure after receiving the results of the first end-of-term examinations …[1]

The researchers Graham Gibbs and Claire Simpson are among many who emphasise the crucial importance of feedback. They speak of, "the extraordinarily large and consistent positive effects that feedback has on learning compared with other aspects of teaching."[2] This chimes with a 1982 study by J. A. Hattie[3], who found that feedback was the most important factor influencing student achievement.

What Macquarie students think

Clearly good feedback is invaluable — but how well do students rate our efforts at Macquarie? The results of recent Course Experience Questionnaires show that in some of our faculties feedback is the worst-performing variable of all the factors students were asked to comment upon. We are faced with the conclusion that while feedback is one of the most important aspects of teaching, at Macquarie it is seriously neglected and is a common source of student dissatisfaction.

In response to these results, in 2007 Anna Rowe did a LEAD project investigating how students at Macquarie feel about feedback[4]. She carried out a series of both individual and focus group interviews with undergraduates in programs such as accounting, economics and finance. There were two contrasting views displayed by the students about the purpose of feedback. One group regarded it as a means for the lecturer to justify the mark they give for assessment tasks and also a means for the student to clarify what the lecturer wants from them; these students commonly saw feedback as primarily a way of helping them to prepare for exams. The other group viewed feedback as a learning tool that improved their understanding and guided them in mastering the skills the course was meant to nurture.

[1] Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge. p. 193

[2] Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004-5) Conditions under which assessment supports student learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, Issue 1, p. 9

[3] Hattie, J. A. (1987) Identifying the salient facets of a model of student learning: A synthesis of meta-analyses. *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 11, pp. 187–212

[4] Rowe, A.D. & Wood, L.N. (2008). *What feedback do students want?* Available at http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/row07086.pdf

Significantly, all the Macquarie students said that feedback was important to them and that they took it seriously. Asked what they liked and disliked about the feedback they were currently receiving, some common themes emerged:

- A number of students said that good feedback gave them a feeling of being taken seriously and respected as individuals.
- Many expressed a strong dislike of feedback that took the form of simply giving the student a mark.
- Students repeatedly said they wanted more feedback, though some also expressed sympathy with lecturers who were coping with large classes, and accepted that generous feedback might only be possible in more senior units.
- Some students admitted to taking feedback less seriously when they had received a high mark.
- A more prominent reason for not engaging with feedback was slow turnaround times. The most common suggestion students had for improving feedback was faster response times.
- Interestingly, both domestic and international students expressed a liking for group feedback, where tutors or lecturers address a whole class or tutorial about general problems and difficulties arising in assignments and tests. They liked it when tutors went through model answers to assignment questions.
- In general they liked verbal feedback when it was generic and delivered to the class as a whole, because it allowed them to seek clarification; but preferred written comments when it came to their individual work. This suggests that an ideal arrangement would be to use both forms in combination.

In this guide

Our aim here is to offer you ways to improve the quality of the feedback you give your students. We will outline:

- A range of the different varieties of feedback available, and some of the pros and cons of these.
- What you can do to increase the effectiveness of the feedback you give your students.
- How you can deal with special problems that make it harder to provide good feedback — for example, very large classes.

The next section looks at the traditional "annotate and grade" approach to feedback and highlights three ways in which choosing this approach can close off alternative options.

Assessment is basically purposeless without really good feedback.

Student

In the subjects I do [feedback] is absolutely crucial. If you don't get shown what you're doing wrong it's going to be very hard for you to improve. Often you know your stuff but you aren't applying it in the right way, or you've got the right idea but your argument is flawed in a particular place. It's important that you're shown where you're going wrong. I think that is absolutely crucial.

Student

We get told our results and you get, you know, 30 out of 40 or whatever and you don't know what you went wrong on … but if you were actually told exactly where you made your mistakes then it would be a good source of learning.

Student

Assessment — it's useless without feedback. So for me my assessments mean nothing because I've never gotten any feedback. I've done alright but I don't know what I did wrong.

Student

Distinctive features of the
TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Feedback is the information teachers give to students concerning:

- *their progress in a course,*
- *what they can do to improve their performance,*
- *how they can keep the primary learning goals of the course clearly in focus, and*
- *why the mark or grade they get is appropriate (this applies whether it is high or low).*

The most common form of feedback is where a teacher goes through a student's test or essay and makes written comments in the margin pointing out where the student has gone wrong and could improve. The student then receives a final summary comment at the end, along with a mark or grade. This traditional "annotate and grade" approach has great virtues but it also has some serious drawbacks. The point we want to make is that it is in fact a very particular kind of feedback. There are at least three ways in which it is distinctive and differs from feedback of other kinds.

Individual versus general focus

Firstly, the annotate and grade approach focuses on the individual student's work, rather than on a model answer or on general tendencies — good or bad — in the way students might have approached an assessment task. An obvious virtue of focusing on the individual is that it deals with each student's particular mistakes, confusions, strengths, and so on, which may be unique to that student.

But while the value of this is unquestionable, it comes at a cost. As all lecturers know, providing this highly individualised feedback is massively work intensive and time consuming. This often leads to another problem, which is that a complete pile of assignments can take many weeks to mark.

This long delay causes students to feel frustrated, and if it is too long some students will completely lose interest in any feedback they eventually receive. Research shows that the longer it takes to return a marked assignment to the student, the less the impact on learning the feedback will have. So all that effort can turn out to be a waste of time!

Finally, in courses with very large enrolments lecturers often find that the traditional method is simply too resource intensive to be practicable.

Written versus verbal delivery

Another way the traditional approach differs from alternatives is that it takes a written rather than a verbal form. Some students like written comments because they can be kept and re-read later. But most of the international students surveyed at Macquarie said they prefer verbal feedback given during lectures and tutorials, because it allows them to ask for further clarity on the points raised by the lecturer. Students often do not understand the written annotations that lecturers make on their assignments because they cannot read the handwriting. Verbal feedback, on the other hand, can become a true dialogue where the lecturer is asked to reformulate and clarify points which students find difficult or obscure.

One-on-one versus group

The traditional method relies on delivery to individual students one at a time. An alternative approach is to give verbal feedback in lectures and tutorials, which enables a range of common difficulties to be aired with a whole group of students. With this method the lecturer might explain model answers to students, or discuss general weaknesses and confusions that tend to crop up in students' work — or both.

Though this kind of feedback clearly has to be generic (it cannot focus on individual students' problems) it has many points in its favour. An obvious advantage of giving feedback to an entire class or tutorial group is that it is time and labour efficient — it is no more work to deliver the feedback to 10, or 100, or 1,000. Another advantage is that the feedback can be delivered soon after the work was submitted, when the students still have it vividly in mind. This makes it much more likely that it will have beneficial effects on the students' learning. Another plus is that students like it. This may be for a number of different reasons — for example, they might find it less threatening than one-on-one feedback.

The traditional approach of course suits many situations. It has been developed — and retained — because it serves a valuable purpose. There are ways you can modify it, however, to allow for greater dialogue with your students, and there are other forms of feedback that may in fact suit your purposes better. In the next section we describe a range of forms of feedback, highlighting the strengths and shortcomings of each.

If I get a good mark I get proud, and you think, yeah, I should probably work like that all the time. Or if you get a bad mark you know you need to lift your game a little bit … unless you get a bad mark after you've worked really hard, and then you get upset.

Student

I hate it when they just give you a bad mark or an average mark and then don't say how you went wrong.

Student

You need to know why, what you've done well, what you haven't, what you could improve on. So yeah, when I get an assessment back that's just got ticks or crosses and then a mark, it's really disheartening. It makes you feel like they don't really care about how well you're doing.

Student

Feedback to suit YOUR PURPOSE

We have outlined a variety of types of feedback for you here — hopefully including some that you haven't come across before and which could prove helpful to you and your students. It is always worthwhile reconsidering one's methods, or adding to them. Changing your style of feedback may make life easier for you as a teacher, and it could also make your students happier with the university experience, as well as raising their level of learning.

A side benefit may be the rewards that come with better results in the ratings and comments you receive from students in the formal questionnaires and other exercises — nowadays routine — where students assess their lecturers as teachers. Recall that feedback is where most lecturers and units score lowest in these assessments!

1. Grading and marking

Let's use "grading" to mean putting a student's work in a certain category (Credit, Distinction, Fail, and so on) and "marking" to mean giving the piece of work a number or percentage as an indication of its standard of excellence — 88%, 4 out of 10, and so on. Because grading and marking tell the student what degree of excellence they have achieved, they certainly count as a kind of feedback.

You should try however to avoid using grading or marking as the *only* form of feedback given for a piece of work, because this method conveys minimal content and is therefore not very helpful. Also, in the case of ranking-based (as opposed to criterion-based) marking schemes, where a certain pre-arranged percentage of students are assigned to each class or category of pass, the grade or mark becomes an unreliable indicator of achievement. (In a very strong group a low mark may not indicate poor work, and the reverse is clearly also true.) For this reason criterion-based marking schemes are better.

Pros
- Quick and relatively easy.

Cons
- This is an extremely blunt instrument which cannot be focused on any specific part of a student's work, or be used to indicate exactly what the merits/demerits are.
- Many students ignore other forms of feedback if they simultaneously receive a mark or grade with that feedback. Some educators recommend that to prevent this from happening, other types (such as written annotations on student essays) should be provided some time *before* students are given marks or grades for their work (but not too long before!).
- Simply entering a mark is confusing to a student who is also doing other courses where standards may be different and marks would therefore mean something different.

Positive feedback is better, even if you haven't done so well, but if they point out where you can improve it's always better.

Student

Distribute a marking scheme!

The best way to deal with the absence of content in this type of feedback is to make the marking scheme explicit, clearly setting out the criteria that fix the category of pass each assignment receives, and then distributing this marking scheme to students. This will enable them to see why their answer has received the grade or mark it has, what additional attributes it would have needed to get a higher mark, and so on. Another virtue of distributing a marking scheme is that it can increase students' confidence in the mark they receive, by demonstrating that there is nothing arbitrary about that mark.

Finally, creating a marking scheme for each assignment has extra value if you are using a team of markers. You can make the marking process fairer and more consistent by requiring them to use it as a common guide, and you will get better results if you go through it first with the team.

Here is an example of a simple marking scheme. Let us say it is for an essay assignment where the students have been asked to discuss a significant event and explain, within certain parameters, why they think it occurred — such as, "What were the main economic factors that influenced the outbreak of the Second World War?"

Factual content: Knowledge of relevant information	Excellent (16 to 20) Good (11 to 15) Fair (6 to 10) Poor (0 to 5)	Mark received by student (out of possible 20): [.............]
Structure/ coherence: Introduction leads to a main section which leads to a conclusion	Excellent (16 to 20) Good (11 to 15) Fair (6 to 10) Poor (0 to 5)	Mark received by student (out of possible 20) [.............]
Analysis: Ability to see general principles/trends that underlie particular events	Excellent (23 to 30) Good (15 to 22) Fair (8 to 14) Poor (0 to 7)	Mark received by student (out of possible 30) [.............]
Argumentation: Essay moves forward by a process of sustained reasoning where claims are supported by evidence	Excellent (23 to 30) Good (15 to 22) Fair (8 to 14) Poor (0 to 7)	Mark received by student (out of possible 30) [.............]
		TOTAL (out of 100): [.............]

One variation that could be made to the above scheme is the addition of a column on the right where the marker could, if they wished, enter a comment to the individual student that is related to a particular criterion. Even with that addition, the above example remains a relatively simple scheme, and many lecturers prefer more elaborate ones. You could, for example, add a column which spells out in more detail what "excellent", "good", "fair" and "poor" mean with respect to each criterion.

There is an excellent discussion of marking schemes — or "rubrics", as they are sometimes called — with examples and advice for constructing them on the Learning and Teaching Centre website at: **http://www.mq.edu.au/ learningandteachingcentre/about_lt/assessment_ toolkit.htm**

2. Annotating individual scripts

This is the traditional method of going through a student's assignment with a pen and making written comments in the margin. These comments indicate where the student has gone wrong, clarify points where they might have become confused and direct them at appropriate points to relevant course literature. You can also use this opportunity to emphasise the positive aspects of their work, by congratulating them on their progress and telling them what you like about this or that feature of their work (and perhaps how they might develop that feature still further). A variation of this method is commenting on an electronic version of their assignment using track changes.

Pros
- This is a wonderful way of responding to a student as an individual and engaging one-on-one with their special strengths and weaknesses. It enables the marker to do justice to the efforts of a student who has worked hard to tackle the topic and produced work that is in parts excellent, though inevitably in need of guidance elsewhere — in other words, where varied feedback over the length of the student's piece of work is valuable.
- The marker's comments are conveyed in a permanent form which the student can think about and study.

Cons
- Time and resource consuming; the workload increases in direct proportion to the number of students.
- This kind of marking calls for mastery of the subject and is therefore difficult to carry out properly using large teams of markers. It is also hard to maintain consistent standards where such teams are used. (A marking scheme to guide team members can help here!)
- It can take a long time, so that students are less responsive to the feedback by the time it is eventually received.

3. Using comment sheets

A good form of feedback is where the lecturer creates a comment sheet (either in the form of a printed sheet or as part of an electronic document) which gathers together brief descriptions of all the common mistakes or shortcomings in the way students have tackled a test or assignment. The sheet is attached to the student's work when it is returned. The sheet describes and numbers each "mistake", with an explanation of how to avoid it, or with a sketch of a better approach, and with references to relevant passages in the assignment literature. When going through a student's submitted work the marker writes down a number (corresponding to a numbered comment on the comment sheet) in the margin whenever they come across a typical mistake, so that the student can look up where they have gone wrong and what to do about it.

Pros

- It is time saving, speeding up and reducing the effort of the marking process, and helping to get feedback to students sooner.
- It provides a way of offering a degree of individual attention to students in very large classes, although this is limited to indicating where the student has lapsed into a typical error.
- If a team of markers is being used, a comment sheet helps team members to focus on a common range of problems, promoting consistency and fairness and helping inexperienced markers do their job.

Cons

- With its list of common mistakes this is an essentially negative approach which needs counteracting with the use of strong encouragements when students get things right. Fortunately good work needs no correcting, so a prominent tick or a "Good!" or "Excellent!" are often the only comments needed! (But if you have time for longer comments on good work, they can help students to develop still further.)

4. Providing model answers to test and essay questions

The idea here is to give students model answers to their test questions or assignment tasks soon after the students have submitted their assignments. (Model answers can be used alongside comment sheets, as described in point 3, as part of the same feedback treatment.) Each model answer provides a succinct example of what an ideal or complete response to the assessment task would look like. The lecturer/tutor goes through the model answer with the class or tutorial group, explaining the virtues of the model and pointing out alternative approaches that also have merit.

Focus on principles — not content

A danger of the model answer approach is that it encourages students to think that there is one right answer to an academic question or problem. For this reason, when discussing model answers you should stress that these are just examples of good answers. Other answers might have been just as good and the important thing is to see the principles underlying what makes a particular answer a good answer — for example, it:

- shows originality or independent thinking
- is clearly written
- is logically reasoned, focusing on arguments rather than mere assertions lifted from the literature
- focuses on exactly what question was asked, rather than bombarding the reader with everything the writer knows in the general area of the question being asked.

Pros

- Model answers are suitable for use with very large classes because the lecturer's work does not increase in proportion to the number of students.
- The student receives the feedback when their own work on the assignment is still fresh in their mind and their interest in how well they have done is at a maximum.
- Where teams of markers are used, model answers are likely to have been developed already to guide them and promote fair standards across the board. With little extra effort these model answers can be made available to students too.

Cons

- The method gives no attention to an individual student's strengths and weaknesses.
- Recently used assignment topics need to be avoided to prevent students simply using last year's model answer to write this year's essay.

Use model answers taken from the students' own work

Model answers can be gathered from students' own work over the years. (You should take care, though, to get a student's permission before distributing their work.) Using students' answers as models can inspire the other students by showing them what superb results can be achieved with effort by someone in their own year. Although the names of students whose work is singled out in this way should not be revealed, this is also a way of rewarding excellent work by showcasing it.

Another variant is to use a mediocre student effort from an earlier year — anonymously of course. Your critique of the assignment will be a way of warning against certain kinds of mistake, while at the same time explaining what would need to be done to turn the mediocre example into an excellent answer.

You can distribute model answers long before assignments are returned

In this variation you work through a model answer with students before giving them back their own marked assignments. This helps with a problem noted by some researchers — that students seem to be more receptive to feedback before they know what mark they will get than they are after getting the mark. It also helps students actively to reflect on and assess their own effort by comparison with the model answer, in this way promoting learning through self-assessment. Finally, it helps you to get feedback to students soon after they have submitted their assignments, without first having to wait until all the assignments have been marked.

5. Responding to questions and oral contributions in class

It is easy to underestimate the importance of the oral feedback you give students when they raise questions during lectures or make contributions during tutorial discussions — remember, they value your opinion as a guide to learning. This kind of feedback provides another way for you to engage with and respond to individual students' ideas and problems. To increase its benefits to all students, you need to make its importance explicit. It can be formally encouraged by methods such as basing a small percentage of the overall course mark on their contribution in class. Care needs to be taken not to unfairly disadvantage shy students or those from learning cultures where speaking up is not the norm. For example, students can be invited to write down questions and send them forward for discussion in time set aside for this purpose. (You could ask students to write their names on their questions while making clear that it is not your practice to disclose names.)

Pros

- Engages with individual student's problems and ideas.
- Creates the possibility of an extended dialogue, initiating participants into the process of academic discussion and argument.

Cons

- Questions from students during lectures can interrupt the flow of the lecture and frustrate the other students. Question and answer sessions during lectures are best confined to a designated question time — perhaps ten minutes per hour of lecture time.
- Tutorial discussions work best with smaller tutorial groups, but these are resource intensive.
- Shyer students find it hard to participate. For help with this problem see the companion booklet in the LEAD series: *How to lead discussions: Learning through engagement* (see "If you want to know more" for the details).

6. Individual student consultations

Making office time available where individual students can ask you questions about course material and assignments provides an excellent opportunity for one-on-one teaching where you can focus on a student's individual problems and ideas. Although this is an effective method, it can be difficult due to the size of most classes to make enough consultation time available to deal with students on this one-to-one basis.

A suggestion

Arrange for each student to come and see you individually for fifteen minutes once during the semester. Be prepared with information about the student (general background, academic track record, test/assignment results in the unit so far, and so on.) and with general advice about what you want from students. Let the students know they too should prepare for these meetings by formulating in advance what questions and problems — academic or otherwise — they want to raise with you.

Pros
- Individual focus.
- Provides for one-on-one dialogue with the lecturer.

Cons
- Time, labour and resource intensive.

It's good to have feedback, not just written either, like have a conversation with the lecturer or person who's marking it.

Student

I always got more written feedback than verbal feedback. It was always good if they gave you half a page of what you did wrong. But sometimes I would have liked more of a sitdown, a class seminar of, "This is how you could have improved your assignments".

Student

7. Peer feedback

Peer feedback, where students comment on or grade each other's work, is an under-used and underestimated variety of feedback. Here are two varieties:

1. *In a tutorial, you give students a short test on recent work, or you ask them to write a five or ten line "essay" on a problem or question you have outlined to them. When they have finished writing, each student exchanges their work with another student. You then go through the test, essay question or problem with the class, briefing the students on good approaches or answers. Using these guidelines, each student marks one other student's work then returns it to them. A variation on this method is to use the marks to count as a small percentage towards each student's overall course mark. It may be a good idea for the marked essays (with both the writer's and marker's names attached) to be taken in and a small number reviewed to ensure students are taking the exercise seriously.*

2. *You outline a question or problem concerning an issue recently discussed in lectures or tutorials and ask the students to write a five or ten line response. When they have finished writing they break up into groups of three or four. Each in turn reads their answer to the group, which assesses, criticises and suggests improvements to each student's answer. A variation might be that each student gives a grade to the different pieces of work presented to their group. (This might work best if the grades for each student are placed in an envelope so that the graded student does not know who gave them which mark.)*

Pros
- In the method where you have outlined good answers to the questions, the students apply these guidelines in assessing the piece of work they have been given to mark — an effective way for the marker to learn.
- In the groups where the students discuss each other's work, there is a pooling of knowledge. Stronger students learn from weaker students. A virtue of this kind of exercise is that the students find themselves explaining ideas to each other — another effective way to learn.
- In both methods the students evaluate something — either their own or another student's written piece — and this sharpens their critical skills.

Cons

- Peer feedback will naturally vary greatly in quality, and students are sometimes sceptical about the possibility of learning from their fellow students. No great weight can be given to peer assessment in determining a student's year mark, and you need to supervise peer-assessment exercises closely to ensure that students participate in the right spirit and apply themselves seriously to the exercises.

8. Choice of feedback

One size does not fit all! Several academics have experimented successfully with giving students options for the form of their feedback. For example, students could be given the choice of written feedback, or instead a short talk with the lecturer to receive the feedback on their learning task. On the assignment cover sheet you can include a box where students can select their feedback preference.

Pros

- Students like to be given a choice and will feel more involved.
- It makes the process of feedback more visible and valuable.

Cons

- Time consuming for a large class.

9. Feedback on final examinations

This is quite controversial but comes up frequently as a major irritation of students. The examination is often worth most of the marks for a unit, but they feel that they do not receive any feedback on their performance. There are several ways to give students general feedback on examination performance:

- At the beginning of the following semester you can summarise how the last group of students went on the examination. It is obviously not the same group, but it does alert them to the type of learning that you are expecting — and gives confidence in the exam process.
- Post the exam and brief solutions on Blackboard soon after the exam, so that students can log on and have a clear idea about how they went.
- Send an email to your class when the marking has been finished with a summary of the concepts or types of questions that were well done and those that were not.

- If your unit is a prerequisite for another, give your summary to the unit convener for the next semester and they can post it for your group to read as they start their next class.

Pros

- Gives students knowledge of your expectations and orients them to the form of the final examination at the beginning of the semester. It alerts them to pitfalls previous students have fallen into.
- The methods we have outlined are easy to do.
- Student complaints can be neutralised.

Cons

- Talking about exams at the beginning of the semester can create the wrong learning environment, as you run the risk that it will encourage students to focus only on exams.

10. Online feedback

You can adapt many of the strategies listed above for use with online tools designed for teachers to communicate with their students. You may find that some of these feedback methods improve with the use of such technology. There are also extra techniques made available through the technology that may prove useful. We offer a few examples here.

Online Feedback Online multiple choice quizzes can be developed in tandem with automated marking and feedback. While writing the questions with the feedback may take time initially, it can be used to provide instant responses to large numbers of students. The questions could, for instance, be set up as end of topic tests. The Learning and Teaching Centre website (at **http://www.mq.edu.au/learningandteachingcentre/**) has guidelines on writing questions. Alternatively, some publishing houses provide databanks of questions to accompany textbooks, which may be useful.

Most online units at Macquarie are delivered through Blackboard, so you can visit the Blackboard help site for more instructions on how to set up online quizzes.

> *I think the important thing about assessment is that it gives students an opportunity to get some feedback about how well they're doing.*
>
> **Student**

Online Feedback Set up online rubrics to provide feedback on student work. You can cut and paste stored comments into the rubric, with personalised comments added for each student. The Assessment toolkit on the Learning and Teaching Centre website has some more information to guide you in setting up rubrics (at **http://www.mq.edu.au/earningandteachingcentre/about_lt/assessment_toolkit.htm**).

Online Feedback As you well know, students often email lecturers with questions. Invite your students instead to post their questions on a discussion forum. Other students could offer answers to the questions, but this system works best if you also answer at least some of the questions — particularly those that recur and seem to be worrying a number of students or causing general confusion. While answering one student's query you will probably be clarifying that problem in many students' minds, thus saving yourself the trouble of answering the same question many times. Eventually, with a bit of editing, you will be able to create a FAQ list for future use.

Online Feedback Use the track change features in MS Word. Comments can be added to students' work without the drawbacks of illegible handwriting!

Online Feedback Create online discussion forums where students can provide feedback to each other while working on assignments. This is an easy way to take advantage of the many benefits of peer assessment. Better informed students pass knowledge on to less informed students, while the process also helps the students who are providing the input because it helps them to clarify their own ideas. Feedback forums also help participating students to understand the assessment process better — for example, by making them think about the criteria for defining good work and how these criteria are best satisfied. By helping to improve students' drafts before final versions are handed in, these forums can also reduce your workload.

A hint for the technologically challenged

A helpful guide to online discussion forums can be found in the companion to this booklet, *How to lead discussions: Learning through engagement*, pp. 8–9. The guide is available at **www.mq.edu.au/businessandeconomics/lt**

And so on to the next section, where we give you some tips and tricks for thinking about whatever form of feedback you might choose to use.

Case study — Online randomised quizzes

Frances Griffin and Sibba Gudlaugsdottir

For the 500 or so students enrolled in Operations Research 1 we have replaced paper quizzes by online quizzes. Students are allowed to attempt each quiz as many times as they need in order to pass it. A quiz has between 12 and 20 questions or question parts. The randomisation feature of the online system ensures that students are always presented with a different version of the quiz. After submitting their answers, students are instantly provided with fully-worked solutions to the problems plus feedback on their performance. This instant feedback enables students to study the solutions and methods prior to making another attempt.

The quizzes are presented as interactive PDF documents, containing form fields similar to those you see on a standard web page. The question types include multiple choice, multiple response (the correct answer is comprised of several choices) and fill-in-the-answer. Multiple response questions are particularly suited to helping students remember definitions, or to interpret output from data analysis software.

With the online quizzes, students' progress and workloads are more evenly paced throughout the semester than they were previously. Furthermore, the online quizzes have been shown to boost students' problem-solving skills and understanding of the subject matter noticeably. They also appreciate the fast and detailed feedback on their performance.

For us, as lecturers, we are able to quickly identify students who are having trouble with the course content and identify areas where the students are all having difficulty so we can change our teaching and revise these areas.

*For a longer discussion of this case study, have a look at Gudlaugsdottir, S. & Griffin, F. (2008). Online quizzes for Operations Research — A Case Study. **Asian Social Science**, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 26–35.*

Tips and tricks for
BETTER FEEDBACK

We have gleaned the following suggestions from our own and other educators' experience (with some quotes from researchers where they seem especially fitting). They're worth thinking about — even if you don't agree on every point!

The sooner you provide feedback, the more effective it is

Not only is late feedback one of the main sources of student complaint about their university courses, but the longer you take to provide feedback, the less influence it will have on learning.

The chief finding of the Harvard Assessment Seminar about the most effective courses at Harvard, as judged by students and alums, was the importance of quick and detailed feedback.[5]

Don't neglect the benefits of generalised feedback

Students greatly appreciate generic feedback given to their group as a whole, especially when it is delivered orally, such as in a lecture or tutorial. This feedback can easily be given soon after assignments have been submitted. Since it can be given to a large class all at once, it is also good for you as it reduces your workload, adding up to a win-win situation from which everyone benefits. This is where model answers can come in handy.

Try to give feedback that students can use later in the same course

Students are likely to take more notice of and therefore learn more from feedback on an assignment if it is relevant to later parts of the course within which that assignment was done. Also worth remembering is that, as we mentioned earlier, many students fail simply because they do not get feedback early enough on how they are doing in a course, so it is important to start early and make your comments directly relevant.

Give feedback when students do good things too — not just when they get things wrong

Pavlov proved long ago that positive reinforcement is a greater aid to learning than punishment! Pointing out mistakes will obviously help with rectifying misunderstandings, but everyone needs praise and students are no different. They are more likely to absorb negative comments and deepen their learning if positive comments accompany the negative ones. It is also worth commenting when the student's work is good and you do not see any particular problems. One Macquarie student pointed out the benefit of extensive comment:

Often I've got things back and been given a whole page of advice about an essay even if it hasn't been a bad essay … Sometimes the lecturer will make an effort to really tell you a lot of things about your work. I've definitely learnt a huge amount from that.

Give students the benefit of the doubt

Begin with the assumption that all your students are keen and want to learn, even if you suspect otherwise in particular cases! If you are unenthusiastic, then they will be too. It seems obvious, on reflection, that it is worse to disappoint a keen student who has been looking forward to solid feedback and then gets none, than it is to waste your time giving good feedback to a student who does not bother to take much notice of it. More is better!

One common complaint is that lecturers' written feedback can come across as patronising. It is better to start with the belief that a student is seriously interested in the work than to assume otherwise. One pitfall here is that clever students sometimes have very poor writing skills — you could easily underestimate who you are dealing with.

[5] Wiggins, G. (1998) *Educative assessment: Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,. p. 35

Have an assessment plan for each unit and use it to help you focus on your teaching goals

It is possible to get side-tracked into marking a student's spelling or grammar, or correcting their facts, when the goal you started out with was to teach them an analytical skill, or how to construct a coherent argument — in other words something having nothing to do with grammar or remembering facts.

Ideally a unit's assessment tasks are designed to promote the unit's learning goals and to take account of students' developing skills as the course continues. Your feedback should remind students of these goals and it should highlight passages where there is evidence of progress towards them.

Focus on generic skills

Make it clear that you are more interested in signs of independent thinking and in students' own arguments than in their ability to regurgitate facts and opinions from their textbooks. You can encourage them to think by inserting unexpected questions into your comments — for example, "Where else do you think this method of analysis would be useful?"; "Good answer — but why do you think it's important to get this right?"

Never give only a grade or mark

As we said earlier, giving only a grade or mark is a very rudimentary form of communication with your students. It does have some value but is of limited worth in assisting learning. Obviously grades or marks are necessary, but they must be accompanied by more detailed responses from you.

It is impossible to overstate the role of effective feedback on students' progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessment. Students are understandably angry when they receive feedback on an assignment that consists only of a mark or grade. I believe that reporting results in this way, whatever the form of assessment, is cheating the students. It is unprofessional teaching behaviour and ought not to be tolerated.[6]

Your marking habits and criteria send a message, so make sure it's a good one!

Students judge what a course is about by looking at the accompanying assessment tasks, and they judge what is important about a course by seeing how you mark those tasks, and especially where your priorities appear to lie in the feedback you provide.

From our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum. In the last analysis, that is where the content resides for them, not in lists of topics or objectives. Assessment sends messages about the standard and amount of work required, and what aspects of the syllabus are most important.[7]

Focus on the work, not the student, and try to be positive

Obviously, personal comments should not be a part of feedback, which should be focused on what the student has written. Researchers also stress the importance of saying something positive along with whatever critical comments you need to make about a student's work.

Your comments should not only draw attention to errors on the script, but should praise good work, such as the appropriateness of techniques used, clear logical exposition, and any evidence of flair and imagination ... Give constructive criticism in a friendly and sympathetic tone, making it clear that it is the student's work which is being criticised and not the student.[8]

If you use teams of tutors, set aside regular times to train them

Most tutors are also students and need guidance. Very experienced tutors can be exempted from training sessions, or brought in to help with training the other tutors. When using teams of markers it is essential to have explicit marking criteria so as to ensure consistency and fairness. This is one of the advantages of having a good marking rubric. Go through it with your marking team.

[6] Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to teach in higher education*, p.193

[7] Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to teach in higher education*, pp. 187–8

[8] Cox, W. (1994) *Practical pointers for University teachers.* London: Cogan Page. p. 97

Look for and reward talent — not right or wrong answers

Be alert to "wrong" answers that are nevertheless interesting and creative. Be prepared to give these answers very high marks and praise. "I think you're wrong about this, but what an interesting answer! Well done! 80% for this section."

Don't over-assess!

Are you requiring too much from your students and staff, perhaps over-assessing? Consider the workloads of students, yourself and your tutors. If tutors know how many pieces of assessment they will have to mark in the semester, they can plan around that and have the time free for marking. It comes back to good planning. And of course you don't want to place unnecessary burdens on your students — they may buckle under the strain, or become frustrated.

Case study — Multiple choice and individual feedback for large numbers of students

John Selby, Patricia Blazey and Michael Quilter

In our Business Law subjects we typically have 1,000 students enrolled per semester. These students are from diverse discipline and cultural backgrounds and many are speakers of English as an additional language. They are studying a range of different degree programs and our subjects are usually their first exposure to Business Law.

As a discipline, Business Law has a steep learning curve, with a complex linguistic logic and very strict referencing requirements. It traditionally assesses student learning through research essays and written problem-solving advices.

When first exposed to the discipline, many students struggle to express their learning coherently through these traditional forms of assessment. We are keen to enhance our students' learning and have found that one of the ways to do this is to diversify the assessment to include some complex multiple choice questions. This reduces the extent to which the students are assessed on their ability to write, as opposed to being assessed on their ability to think and to apply the legal problem-solving methodology we teach. We continue to use traditional forms of assessment, but only for approximately 50% of the summative assessment for each subject.

The multiple choice assessments are undertaken in class and computer marked. The software we are developing will take the output of the computer-marked assessments and generate and deliver customised feedback tailored for each student within one week of them sitting their exam. This is in contrast to the 4-5 weeks delay in receiving feedback for traditional forms of assessment. Prompt feedback has a significant impact on increasing student learning, especially in helping students to self-identify and rectify under-performance midway through the semester.

Students will receive an email with a breakdown of the areas in which they were assessed during their exam and their absolute and relative performance for each area. They will also be given guidance on common mistakes that they made with suggestions on what they could do to improve that weakness. The areas of strengths and weaknesses identified also match the graduate capabilities we are developing in the students.

There are a number of benefits expected from the introduction of multiple choice assessments incorporated into our Business Law subjects:

1. *The incorporation of software-based, customised student feedback systems will address one of the primary frustrations of students, namely lengthy delays between assessment pieces being sat and feedback being received.*

2. *A reduced emphasis on writing traditional extended essay and problem-solving assessment tasks should provide opportunities for students with various levels of English-language proficiency to display their abilities at both surface and deep levels.*

3. *Software-based feedback enables us to give guidance efficiently to students on how to improve their learning, without having to reveal the specific answers to our questions. Effective multiple-choice questions take a long time to write and there are significant productivity benefits from being able to re-use questions in future semesters.*

Finally...

To sum up, a few points we would like to emphasise:

- *Feedback is good — some say it is THE most important aspect of teaching!*
- *Most students value feedback and want more of it than they are actually getting.*
- *When done badly, feedback wastes both your students' time and your own.*
- *Be sympathetic and friendly with your feedback — for some students it is lonely out there, and they need as much contact with you as they can get.*
- *Remember that your students respect and value your opinion — or most of them do! — so be generous in sharing your ideas.*
- *Everyone should be at Macquarie to learn, including you as a teacher, so try to use feedback not only to help your students to learn but to help you to teach.*
- *Don't get stuck in a one-dimensional view of feedback — experimentation will help you settle on the forms of feedback that best suit your courses, your students and your personal style.*

So there you are — perhaps not all you ever wanted to know about feedback, but we hope there was something new and useful there for everyone. Next — and lastly — a list of sources you can go to for more information and ideas.

> *I think you benefit more from a learning point of view from strong interactions leading up to an assessment. It shouldn't be about catching you out about what you don't know; it should be building you up for what you should [do].*
>
> **Student**

If you want to KNOW MORE

1. **A very useful Macquarie web resource on assessment and feedback is**

   Giving assessment feedback, *Assessment Toolkit Resources*. Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Centre, available at **http://www.mq.edu.au/ learningandteachingcentre/about_lt/assess_docs/ giving_ass_feedback.pdf**

2. **The full details for the LEAD discussion guide we have referred to in this guide are**

   Wood, L., McNeill, M. & Harvey, M. (2008) *How to lead discussions: Learning through engagement*. Sydney: Division of Economic and Financial Studies & Learning and Teaching Centre, Macquarie University. It is available at **www.mq.edu.au/ businessandeconomics/lt**

3. **Another helpful source on feedback, also produced at Macquarie, is**

   Rowe, A.D. & Wood, L.N. (2008). *What feedback do students want?* Paper presented at the 2008 Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) International Education Research Conference. Freemantle, Australia (CD and online). The link to the AARE conference proceedings is **http://www.aare.edu.au/07pap/row07086.pdf**

   You might also want to look at

   Rowe, A., Wood, L., & Petocz, P. (2008), *Engaging students: Student preferences for feedback*, which can be found at **http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/ uploads/conference/2008/media/Rowe.pdf**

4. **An excellent short discussion of assessment in general, with valuable material on feedback, is**

   Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004-5) Conditions under which assessment supports student learning, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, Issue 1, pp. 3–31.

5. **A good discussion of the general art of being a university teacher is**

   Ramsden, P. (1992) *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge. On assessment and feedback, see especially Chapter 10, "Assessing for understanding".

6. **A great source of ideas about teaching generally is**

   Cox, W. (1994) *Practical pointers for University teachers*. London: Cogan Page.

7. **If large classes are causing you stress, have a look at**

   Habeshaw, S., Gibbs, G. & Habeshaw, T. (1992) *53 problems with large classes*. Bristol: Technical and Educational Services Ltd. See especially Chapter 5, "Assessment", on pp. 119–156.

Looking for ways to motivate your students?

"Assessment is useless without really good feedback" — true or false?

Need ideas to speed up your response time for students?

Want to try online feedback strategies?

Need some handy hints to improve the quality of feedback?

Then this guide is for you!

This booklet is one of a series produced for the Learning Excellence and Development (LEAD) program. The program brings together as a team a multi-disciplinary group of university staff — general staff as well as academics — each working on a separate but related project to enhance student learning. The projects use an action research approach to nurture a research-based and responsive teaching culture. The program is managed by the Faculty of Business and Economics.