

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Making feedback work involves more than giving feedback – Part 2 The students

An earlier idea in this series (No.8) concerned the leverage available to improve student learning by changing students, rather than changing teachers or teaching. Nowhere is this more important than in efforts to make feedback more effective. The previous idea (No. 27) concerned things teachers and course designers can do to make the context feedback is provided in more conducive. This item is about the role that students play in making feedback effective and how they can make better use of whatever feedback is provided.

Assessment literacy

Successful students make quite different use of feedback than unsuccessful students and one approach to making feedback more effective is to simply change average and weak students' habits so that they use feedback as successful students do. Successful students are more likely to actually read the feedback, to think about it, and to see what they can learn from it that would help them. They look back at feedback on past assignments to make use of whatever is available to tackle the current assignment. They pay attention to criteria and standards and orient their efforts towards these criteria, and as a consequence they are better at judging what mark they will receive and are less likely to be widely out of alignment in their work or to be surprised or

dismayed by their mark. They can make sense of feedback because they understand how it relates to criteria and standards. Put together, these characteristics have been described as 'assessment literacy'. Some students are 'assessment illiterate' and until they are a bit more sophisticated, providing feedback might be a waste of effort.

- Developing students' assessment literacy can involve quite simple (and cheap) practices, for example:
- Providing exemplars of assignments of different standards, and students discussing why some are better than others.
- Running marking exercises in which students mark assignments, and then discuss their critiques and marks with those of other students, and with those of an expert.
- Requiring students to complete a self-assessment sheet, attached to the assignment when it is submitted, structured around the formal criteria and standards, so that they are obliged to reflect upon their own work before they receive feedback.
- Putting class time aside for students to discuss their assignments, and the marks and feedback they received, with other students, and to draw

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conclusions about how they should tackle future assignments.

- Using two-stage assignments so that students have an opportunity to make immediate use of feedback to improve their work and their marks.
- Using peer feedback on drafts with an opportunity for students to discuss their work with others, before they submit it and well before they receive expert feedback.

The main purpose here is to develop students' awareness and habits of reflection and self-criticism, so that when they receive feedback they have a much better developed frame of reference for understanding it and have had the experience of making use of feedback. Studies have shown that students who have undertaken marking exercises do not simply gain better marks for the next assignment, but for later assignments, and even on subsequent courses. They have internalised what quality means on their courses and have got into the habit of reflecting about the quality of their work in relation to their understanding of quality. Eventually they will become autonomous and self-improving and will not be so reliant on external feedback. In the mean time they will make much better use of the feedback they receive.

Students' sophistication as learners

Some of the things a teacher is likely to criticise a student for, and mark down their work for, are a direct result of student misconceptions about what learning is, what

knowledge is, and what they are supposed to be doing with the subject matter (see idea No.8). Writing 'Conclusion?' or "But what do you think?" in the margin would mystify some students because they do not understand what a conclusion is or believe it is their right to express one, given that there are much more expert conclusions in their textbooks. When a student lists (correct) facts, but still gets a poor mark, a teacher writing "Argument?" in the margin may again make no sense at all. Sometimes the problem is not sophistication as a learner, but sophistication in using the discourse of the discipline. My daughter once found the only feedback on her Sociology essay was the criticism: "Not Sociological enough!" She said to me "If I had known how to be 'Sociological enough' I would have done it!"

Students' orientations

One of the reasons some students read and pay attention to feedback, while others don't, is not that some are 'assessment literate' while others are not, but that some do not see the point: it does not help them achieve what they want to achieve. Idea No. 1 outlined the different orientations students have been found to display. They want to achieve different things and they pay attention to different things as a consequence. If all a student is interested in is passing or progression to the next stage, then actually learning about the subject matter from feedback may not be on their agenda, especially if the course is almost over or there is no follow-up course that builds on the

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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subject matter. Changing students' orientation is not at all easy but it is possible to make it difficult for students to pass unless they engage seriously with the course, whether they like it or not. It is also possible to make it easy for students to ignore the teacher's agenda and still pass, and many courses and their assessment regimes achieve this dubious distinction. Teachers may bemoan how instrumental students have become, but they also often collude to make instrumentalism quite a successful strategy, in order to avoid too many students failing.

Students' hope for success or fear of failure

When an aspect of a student's assignment is criticised, what is a student to make of this? Some students are driven by fear of failure. They make conservative decisions about what assignments to tackle and how to tackle them. They are concerned to limit the chance of anything going wrong, of getting poor marks or, heaven forbid, actually failing. Criticism might be seen as an indication of failure and suggest that they were not conservative or safe enough in their decisions. Feedback might be rejected or avoided altogether. Sometimes such a student will take steps to avoid the same criticism next time, even when that would be inappropriate in a different context, out of fear of getting it wrong again.

Other students may be driven by hope for success. They are optimistic, would see some criticism as inevitable given the risks they have

taken, and would be likely to use any information they are given, both praise and criticism, to get better. As far as making feedback effective is concerned, it is the 'fear of failure' students you have to worry about.

The usual advice to teachers, faced with such contrasting student reactions, is to be careful about criticism, to start with overall positive comments, and turn what might have been detailed negative comments into suggestions concerning how the assignment could have been tackled differently, or how the next assignment could be tackled. But helping students to be less fearful can also be effective. This might involve making them much clearer about what they are supposed to be doing, showing them what success and failure actually looks like in exemplar assignments, and developing the skills they need to achieve good results. Formative assignments (with no marks) that give students a lower risk opportunity to learn how to tackle assignments could also help develop both risk-taking and self-confidence. Again, changing the students can be the appropriate strategy.

Suggested reading

[Price, M., Rust, C., O'Donovan, B., Handley, K. with Bryant, R. \(2012\) *Assessment Literacy: the foundation for improving student learning*](#)

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