**Feedback extracts for LTHE Tweetchat (for 19th October 2016)**

**Phil Race (with additional extract from Sally Brown at the end)**

**Note:** these extracts from my 2014 and 2015 books are posted temporarily, as background or follow-up reading for the Tweetchat at #LTHEchat from 2000-2100 on Wednesday October 19th. I’ve added a few words at the beginning, e.g. updating the feedback criteria for the 2017 NSS, and explaining the basis for the choice of extracts presented here.

**For help on how to participate in an LTHE Tweetchat, follow @LTHEchat on Twitter,** where the six questions I have supplied will be released one each 10 minutes or so (if we don’t all get too carried away).

**Feedback and the NSS 2017 question set** See [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/CL,302016/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/CL%2C302016/) for further information.

It is clear from the published documentation about the Teaching Excellence Framework, that NSS will be very important among the metrics planned to be used for ranking institutions into ‘gold, silver and bronze’ categories. Feedback has increased prominence in the 2017 NSS, with questions 8-11 having been tightened from their original versions, and with Questions 12 and 13 having distinct implications for feedback processes. Additionally, the new Questions 23-25 bring in feedback from students, and how this is handled. The table below presents the 2017 NSS statements for reference.

|  |
| --- |
| **Revised NSS Questionnaire 2017** |
| *Numbering refers to the new question numbers* |
| **The teaching on my course [four questions reduced to three]** |
| 1. Staff are good at explaining things |
| 2. Staff have made the subject interesting |
| 3. The course is intellectually stimulating |
| 4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work |
| **Learning Opportunities [New section]** |
| 1. My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth
 |
| 1. My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics
 |
| 1. My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt
 |
| **Assessment and feedback [five questions reduced to four]** |
| 8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance  |
| 9. Marking and assessment have been fair |
| 10. Feedback on my work has been timely |
| 11. I have received helpful comments on my work |
| **Academic support** |
| 12. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to |
| 13. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course |
| 14. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course |
| **Organisation and management**  |
| 15. The course is well organised and ~~is~~ running smoothly |
| 16. The timetable works efficiently for me ~~as far as my activities are concerned~~ |
| 17. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively |
| **Learning resources**  |
| 18. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well |
| 19. The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well |
| 20. I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to  |
| **Learning community [new section]** |
| 1. I feel part of a community of staff and students
 |
| 1. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course
 |
| **Student voice** [new section, including a ‘students’ union’ question, to be reported separately to the other NSS questions] |
| 1. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course
 |
| 1. Staff value students’ views and opinions about the course
 |
| 1. It is clear how students’ feedback on the course has been acted on
 |
| 1. The students’ union (association or guild) effectively represents students’ academic interests
 |
| **Overall satisfaction** |
| 27. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course |

(Please note that I wasn’t involved in drafting any of the NSS statements, but the survey has become important not least because of the way the statistics it gives are being used).

**Extracts from ‘Making Learning Happen: 3rd edition’ (Sage, 2014)**

In earlier parts of this book, feedback has been identified as one of the seven principal factors underpinning successful learning. Feedback should interact with the other factors continuously, as follows:

* Feedback should help learners to *make sense* of what they have done.
* Feedback should help learners to clarify and take ownership of the *need* to learn as defined by the evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes defining their studies.
* Feedback ideally should enhance learners’ *want* to learn by increasing their self-esteem and confidence whenever possible, and by helping them to believe that they can indeed achieve the intended learning outcomes *and* demonstrate this in ways where they will be duly credited for this achievement.
* Feedback should motivate learners to move forward into their next episodes of *learning by doing* and focus their efforts more sharply towards bringing the experience from their past work to bear on making their next work better.
* Feedback gained while *explaining*, *coaching* and even *teaching* fellow-learners can add enormously to learners’ mastery of what they have learned, and increase their confidence as they work towards communicating their knowledge in formal assessments.
* Involving learners in *assessing – making informed judgements* can open up to them a great deal of further feedback on how their learning is progressing, and how well they are becoming able to provide evidence of their achievement in each of the forms which will make up their overall assessment.

# Feedback or feed-forward?

Some writers already use the term ‘feed-forward’ to describe those aspects of feedback which particularly point towards what to do next, rather than merely looking backwards at what has (or has not) already been achieved by learners. Hounsell described Feed-forward as follows:

Feedforward is a strategy that aims to ‘increase the value of feedback to the students by focusing comments not only on the past and present…but also on the future – what the student might aim to do, or do differently in the next assignment or assessment if they are to continue to do well or to do better (Hounsell, 2008, p. 5).

Feed-forward can offer help along the following lines:

1. Details of what would have been necessary to achieve better marks or grades, expressed in ways where learners can seek to improve their future assignments or answers.

2. Praise relating to things which learners have done really well, so that they don’t simply shrug off their success, but take on board what to *continue* to do well in future assignments and assessment contexts.

3. Direct suggestions for learners to try out in their next piece of work to overcome problems or weaknesses arising in their last assignment.

4. Suggestions about sources to explore, illustrating chosen aspects of what they themselves are being encouraged to do in their own future work.

Feed-forward can be regarded as *formative –* in other words, pointing towards improving and developing future work. This contrasts with *summative* feedback, referring back principally to what was – and what was not – achieved in past work. Ideally, feedback needs to achieve both purposes, but the danger is that it sometimes is not sufficiently formative and is too dominated by summative comments.

# Is feedback broken too?

In Chapter 4, it was argued that assessment is broken in higher education. The same arguments extend to feedback too, as very often it is linked to assessment. For example, in the National Student Survey, administered to all final-year students every year in the UK since 2005, (and revised for use in 2017 onwards) in the section on ‘assessment and feedback’, several statements link directly to students’ experience of feedback. As with the survey results on assessment, students’ responses about feedback have continued to show that this is one of the least satisfactory areas in their overall experience of higher education. Many institutions in the UK have taken action to try to improve students’ perceptions of the value of feedback, but the problem still continues to perplex staff.

It can be argued that giving learners feedback is just about the most important dimension of the work of teachers in post-compulsory education, second only perhaps to that of making assessment judgements which can affect the future careers and lives of our learners. But perhaps all told, formative feedback is *the* vital dimension as, given at the right time and in the best possible way, it can lead learners steadily towards successful achievement in summative assessment contexts.

Among Sadler’s many valuable contributions to the literature on feedback is the following extract (Sadler, 2010)

Giving students detailed feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their work, with suggestions for improvement, is becoming common practice in higher education. However, *for many students, feedback seems to have little or no impact*, despite the considerable time and effort put into its production. With a view to increasing its effectiveness, extensive theoretical and empirical research has been carried out into its structure, timing and other parameters. For students to be able to apply feedback, they need to understand the meaning of the feedback statements. They also need to *identify, with near certainty, the particular aspects of their work that need attention*. For these to occur, students must possess critical background knowledge. This article sets out the nature of that knowledge and how students can acquire it. They must appropriate for themselves three fundamental concepts - task compliance, quality and criteria - and also develop a cache of relevant tacit knowledge. (Sadler, 2010)

# Varieties of formative feedback

What sorts of feedback can help to make learning happen more successfully? There are many ways in which feedback can reach learners, each with advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps the more *different* ways we use to get feedback to learners, the more likely we are to ensure that they receive at least some feedback in ways which suit their own personal approaches to learning.

## Written, printed and on-screen feedback

All this can be regarded as feedback in the ‘read-write’ domain of Neil Fleming’s ‘VARK’ inventory. Such feedback can take many forms, including:

* handwritten comments directly entered on to learners’ work
* summary overall comments on learners’ assignments – handwritten, word-processed or emailed directly to learners
* model answers or specimen solutions, giving feedback to learners on what may have been looked for in their own work
* generic feedback on a batch of learner work, in print, emailed to all learners, or put up on an electronic discussion list, virtual learning environment or computer conference
* sheets listing ‘frequently occurring problems’ or ‘frequently needed explanations’ specific to a particular assignment, allowing learners to see feedback on some of the problems they may themselves have encountered, but also alerting them to other potential problems they may not have been aware of themselves, but which may be useful to avoid in their next work.

**Feedback on other learners’ work**

I’ve already suggested that written comments on learners’ work are not usually a successful feedback tactic, despite how endemic this process is at present. However, learners can benefit a great deal from feedback on each others’ work. For example, when Sue reads the feedback on her own work, high emotions can come into play if there is some criticism, and she may well shrug off encouraging comments as she looks for the next critical bit. But if Sue is reading the feedback on Janet’s work, when there is some encouragement Sue may well say to herself ‘Ah, that’s the thing to do, I can do this next time’, and when Sue reads some criticism on Janet’s work Sue may think ‘Mmm, that’s what not to do, I’ll make sure I avoid this myself in future’ and so on. My own view is that learners can get a great deal more reading the feedback on each others’ work than that on their own work. We have to be careful how we set this up, however, and it’s best if the choices of who reads each others’ feedback are left to learners themselves to arrange informally. It can be counter-productive if learners feel they have been ‘set up’ to read particular elements of feedback.

**Audio feedback on mp3 files**

Many tutors nowadays are experimenting with sending students (for example by email attachment) audio files of spoken feedback on their work. Findings of a JISC-funded project at Leeds Metropolitan University can be found at <https://sites.google.com/site/soundsgooduk/> . (Soundsgood, 2010) The feedback can be spoken into a small digital audio recorder (or a suitable mobile phone) then uploaded onto a computer and then sent directly to the individual student. Students quite like having their tutor’s voice talking them through their work, and are often reported as listening to the recordings several times. The voice can be much more encouraging than mere printed or written words. Sometimes, the mark for the work can be included only in the audio feedback, which means students need to listen to find out their marks.

# Face-to-face feedback

This extends feedback into the auditory, visual and kinesthetic areas of Neil Fleming’s ‘VARK’ inventory, and brings into play the enhanced communication power of tone-of-voice, facial expression, body language, gesture, and so on. Face-to-face feedback can take several forms, including:

* feedback to whole lecture groups on work that has already been marked and is now being returned to them
* feedback to similar groups, but at the time they have just handed in their work, while it is still fresh in their minds. This feedback of course addresses *anticipated* problems or mistakes, but can be really valuable to learners, still remembering the fine detail of their own attempts at the work
* feedback to small groups of learners, for example, in tutorials, allowing more interaction – for example, learners can probe deeper into what exactly the feedback means
* face-to-face, one-to-one feedback, by appointment, or in other learning contexts such as practical classes or studio work, where tutors can often chat to individual learners in a context less formal than individual appointments.

## Feedback on learners’ own self-assessments

Where learners are briefed to carry out a self-assessment of their assignments at the point of handing them in for marking, tutors can then not only give learners feedback on the assignments themselves, but also on the self-assessment reflections. In practice, this can help tutors to give learners feedback which is much more focused on learners’ real needs than just giving feedback without knowing what learners themselves already thought about their own strengths and weaknesses relating to the assessed work.

## Feedback associated with peer assessment

Where groups of learners are assessing each other’s work (whether written assignments, essays, reports, presentations, artefacts, exhibitions or posters), learners can get a great deal of feedback from their peer assessors. They also get what is perhaps even more useful feedback individually, directly from the processes of applying assessment criteria to other examples of work – some better than their own, and some not as good. All this helps them to place their own work in context and to work out what they may need to do next time to improve or develop their own future work.

# Just a mark is the least useful form of feedback!

In the ‘effectiveness versus efficiency’ explorations summarized above, ‘just a mark’ often scores poorly when feedback is judged on effectiveness and efficiency. In other words, it is very ineffective as feedback for learners, but takes us a lot of time to do! There are problems here.

* Learners *expect* marks – and may complain if we don’t give them marks.
* When learners get marks, that is the first thing they look at, and they get blinded by the mark.
* Feedback is often then ignored – or (worse) interpreted in an emotive way, depending on the mark.
* If the mark is high, learners are likely to ignore the feedback, and ‘smile and file’. They may well be missing out on finding out *why* the mark was high, and thereby becoming better able to continue in future work to do the things that got them the high mark.
* If the mark is low, learners often bin the assignment concerned, and miss out on all the feedback which might have helped them to work out how to get better marks for similar work next time.

What can we do about these problems? I suggest the following:

 1. At a whole-class session, give students back their marked work, but with feedback comments only and no marks (keeping your own record of their scores).

 2. Remind them of the assessment criteria and tell them to use the next week to work out their marks from the feedback, and return next week with their scores for the work.

 3. Tell the class that their marks count! Suggest that if their scores are within 5% (or one grade) of the scores you’ve given them, the *higher* score will go forward into their assessment records, but that if they are outside 5%, you will talk individually to them and sort out the score face to face.

 4. Suggest that they don’t just look at the feedback on their own work, but also the feedback on a few fellow-learners’ work. Explain that every time they look at some work which is better than theirs, they will learn something useful, and will be better able to get higher marks next time they do something similar. Also explain that every time they see someone else’s work which has attracted critical feedback that their own work missed, they will learn something useful and will be able to *avoid* similar mistakes in future work. In other words, the time spent comparing their work with that of others will always be productive in terms of *making sense* of the subject matter, and (even more importantly) they will be *learning by making informed judgements* about their own and each other’s work (the ‘informing’ being done through the feedback they see).

 5. Next week, pass a board around the group asking everyone to enter their mark against their name. This can be achieved in just a few minutes of a whole-class session, even with hundreds of students there.

 6. Two important things have happened over the week, and with no extra cost of time to you: just about all of your learners have read your feedback and many of them have learned from the feedback that some of their classmates have received too.

 7. In practice, nine out of ten learners are likely to arrive at scores within 5% of your own scores, and the higher numbers can go forward. This means that nine out of ten of your learners are very satisfied with the marking and feedback, as follows:

They have been awarded the mark they awarded themselves, or

They have got a small number of extra marks, where either:

you gave them a slightly higher mark than they gave themselves, or

they got away with a slightly higher mark than you gave them!

 8. Make time to talk individually to the remaining one in ten of the learners, now of course using the full human communication range including facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice and so on.

 9. Where they underestimated their scores, point out to them where they deserved more marks than they had awarded themselves. Show them where they had in fact achieved the outcomes which they didn’t think they had achieved. These learners go away with a spring in their step, even happier than the nine out of ten referred to earlier. After all, they’ve just found that they’re doing better than they thought they were.

10. Where they overestimated their scores, go through their work with them until you find out where the main difference arose. It’s usually because of a blind spot – something they thought they’d cracked but which they haven’t yet mastered in fact. Talk them through this blind spot until they can see exactly why they lost the marks concerned, and get them to talk you through it so you can check that they have really seen the light about why they lost those marks, and what they can do to avoid losing similar marks ever again. (Don’t just say ‘Do you understand now?’ Make sure they do by getting them to show you.) These learners go away happiest of all – and they are *very* unlikely ever to lose those particular marks again.

Let’s just summarize what has been achieved by getting learners to work out their own marks:

A. Learners have taken much more notice of the feedback than if you’d given them marks.

B. 100% of them are very happy with it all.

C. You’ve spent relatively little additional time achieving all this.

D. You’ve spent that additional time giving really useful face-to-face feedback to the one in ten who really needed face-to-face feedback, and you’ve avoided wasting time with all the learners who don’t really need such face-to-face feedback.

E. You’ve optimized the learning of your students by getting them to *make informed judgements*.

F. You’ve got something really interesting to add to your teaching portfolio, or to please your external examiner.

In the light of all the benefits of getting students to work out their own marks, the original problem of ‘students expect marks’ fades somewhat into insignificance. You may, however, come up against the occasional learner who says ‘It’s your job to assess my work. I’m paying for this course.’ My own reply tends to be along the lines ‘Fine, I’ll give you your mark. But I’m not very good at marking. And you’ll miss out on a lot of learning. And you may miss out on some marks you might otherwise have got. But it’s up to you.’

# The language of feedback

A lot has been written about the wording we use in feedback to learners. There are problems with what some call ‘final language’, including such words and phrases as ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘adequate’, ‘poor’. Such feedback may give an indication of the quality of a piece of work, but does not provide any direction as to what to do about it, in other words, no feed-forward. Words like those above are judgemental, and somewhat authoritarian. Would you be delighted to receive some feedback along the lines that something you had done was found to be ‘adequate’? We also need to avoid the danger of concentrating much of our feedback effort towards the lower-fliers. High-fliers can feel short-changed by minimal feedback even when marks or grades indicate their success.

Rather than say ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, it can be better to offer feedback along the lines ‘splendid – keep doing this’, or ‘this will continue to get you good marks – don’t stop’, because learners often just don’t notice praise when they’ve done something well, and may never repeat their demonstration of strength otherwise. Feed-forward along the lines of ‘you could make this even better by.....’ can also help. High-fliers quite like to have targets to aim towards. When work is much less good, rather than point out all the inadequacies it can be more fruitful to suggest ‘Three things you can do to make this kind of work much better are as follows....’.

Most learners like the personal touch in feedback. Phrases such as ‘I really like the way you....’ can warm their feelings about the feedback as a whole. Talking to learners themselves, the thing that makes a massive difference is when a tutor notes how well they’ve taken on board a feedback suggestion from a previous assignment. This does of course mean from the tutor’s point of view we need to keep records of what has been said to whom – and the whole thing becomes impossible if marking is anonymised.

# Feedback within 24 hours!

At workshops and conferences, I often alarm participants by stating ‘Feedback is of little use unless students get it within 24 hours!’ Delegates shake their heads sadly. I remind them of the real-life experiences of a day where things go badly – one may remain upset for the rest of that day, but on waking the following morning, it’s rarely quite as bad as it seemed to be. And a few days later, it’s faded from the mind quite a lot. It’s rather similar with feedback – we need it while our thinking is still fresh in our minds. After a few days, feedback is much less readily received – the work has receded into the past. But there are ways of achieving 24-hour feedback, as discussed in this section and previously developed in Race and Pickford (2007).

There’s nothing new about the idea that feedback has to be quick to be effective. It is widely accepted that feedback on students’ work is most effective when it is received quickly, while they still remember clearly what they were trying to do in their efforts. The work in Australia of Sadler (1989, 1998, 2003, 2009a, 2009b 2010) has consistently emphasized the role of formative feedback in leading students towards successful learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) look critically at a decline in the quantity and quality of formative feedback which students receive as class sizes grow in a climate of policies about widening participation in higher education. Bowl (2003) provides a wealth of detail about how students react to feedback (or the lack of it) in her book based on interviews with non-traditional entrants to higher education. Yorke (2002) writes convincingly of the role (and speed) of formative feedback in addressing student non-completion, and Knight and Yorke (2003) continue the argument that there are major problems in higher education with assessment and formative feedback, an argument developed further in this book.

Some feedback can be nearly instantaneous, for example when using computer-based or online multiple-choice exercises, where the feedback to choosing distractors (or correct options) can appear on-screen as soon as students select an option. Feedback on practical work can be relatively instantaneous too. However, it is often the case that students get feedback on essays, reports, problems sheets, and so on much too late – it can take weeks to mark their work, particularly if the class size is large. By the time students receive their feedback, they may well have moved on, and then they take very little notice of the feedback. Colleagues in many institutions complain that too many students don’t even bother to pick up their marked work. Even when much care and effort and time have been put into writing the feedback, it often ends up entirely wasted! Life is too short to waste time on composing feedback that won’t be read or used.

In this section, I suggest processes that enable feedback (on paper and face-to-face with whole groups) to be given to large (or indeed small) groups of students within 24 hours of them engaging with the work they hand in for assessment. **No ‘yes, buts …’ please**, … at least not yet.Before you read this discussion, please prepare to abandon any reservations to the ideas you are about to see – at least for the next two pages or so. Then we’ll address some of the ‘yes, buts...’.

1. You’ve issued the class with an assignment, including all the usual detail about assessment criteria, links to intended learning outcomes, suggested sources, and so on.

2. Suppose you ask your class to bring the completed assignment (essay, report, whatever) to a particular whole-class session, for example a lecture – say the 10.00–11.00 lecture next Tuesday morning.

3. Explain that the *absolute* deadline for receipt of their work is 10.03 on Tuesday morning, and the (only) place they can hand in that assignment is at this particular lecture during the first minute or two.

4. On the day, ask all students to place their work in a pile on a table at the front of the lecture room, in the first three minutes of the lecture period. By 10.03 or so, you have all their work (and a good attendance).

5. As soon as you’ve got all of their work (e.g. at 10.03), distribute to everyone in the group copies of a pre-prepared feedback sheet on the assignment concerned – on a coloured sheet of paper (different colours for successive assignments, so you can say ‘The blue sheet’, ‘The pink sheet’, and so on to refer to particular examples of these feedback sheets). On the sheet, use numbered points, so you can say ‘Point 3 on the blue sheet’ to refer to a particular explanation, for example. This feedback sheet can contain:

explanations to anticipated, frequently-occurring problems

 illustrations of components of a good answer to the assignment question

examples of useful source materials and references

 model solutions of quantitative parts of the assignment (if applicable).

6. Allow your class three minutes to scan through the feedback sheet (e.g. 10.03–10.06). It goes very quiet! Suddenly, lots of students are finding out things about what they missed out of their attempts at the assignment, things they got wrong, but also things that were good about their attempts, and so on. Your class is getting quite intense read–write feedback in these three minutes or so.

7. Next, just for three minutes (10.06–10.09) talk the whole group through only one or two of the most significant of the feedback areas on the sheet, adding tone of voice, body language, eye contact to help the meaning of your feedback to be really clear to the students, augmenting one or two of the paragraphs on your feedback sheet. Don’t try to cover the whole sheet – that would be too boring for the class and would take too long. *Which* points should you cover? Watch carefully students near to you between 10.03 and 10.06. See where they look serious as their eyes rest on particular parts of the sheet. These give you clues about which points will be most valuable to expand on between 10.06 and 10.09.

8. Everyone in the class has now had three minutes benefiting from your feedback sheet, and a further three minutes getting some richer feedback on particularly important points about the assignment.

9. Then proceed with the lecture as normal.

## The point of all this?

Most of the students will still have been finishing off the assignment – or at least giving it a final check – *within the last 24 hours.* Moreover, more students than you might imagine will in fact have only *started* on the assignment during the last 24 hours – it’s worth asking them! These are likely to be the ones who need the feedback the most, and they are very receptive to it at this time. This means they are now getting feedback while they still have a very clear view on what they were trying to do in the assignment and while they remember what their difficulties may have been. They are getting feedback while they still remember very clearly what they were pleased with about their work on the assignment. They are therefore getting a lot of feedback while they really *want* to know how their work will fare in assessment. They are thirsty for feedback at this point.

## Now you can mark that assignment in much less time!

When you actually go away to mark your students’ work, you can save up to two-thirds of the time you would normally have spent marking it. You save time and energy as follows:

* You don’t have to write the same things on many different students’ assignments – the common mistakes and difficulties have already been covered by your feedback sheet, and you can simply write ‘Please see point 5 on the blue sheet’, and so on. (Most tutors admit that in ‘normal’ marking, they get fed up of writing the same explanations time after time on different students’ work, and that they get less and less patient doing so!) It is, however, important to take the few seconds needed to write that ‘please see…’ briefing on the student’s work, and not to assume that because the explanation the student needs has already been given out that the student will see the link to his or her own work.
* You can now concentrate in the time you devote to marking the assignment to giving students feedback on particular things they need as individuals – in other words focusing your expertise where it is most helpful to your students.
* If, as you are marking the work of a large class, additional frequently-needed explanations arise (over and above the ones you had on the blue sheet, for example), you can compose a new supplement to the blue sheet (probably just half a page or so in practice), covering perhaps points 8 to 10 to supplement the 7 points already on the blue sheet. You can then, where necessary, abbreviate many of your feedback remarks on students’ work to ‘Please see point 9 on the blue sheet supplement attached’, continuing to save you time and spare you the tedium of repetition.
* Because you’ve debriefed your students *orally* in the whole group about the most important points in your pre-prepared feedback, there’s little need to mention these points in any additional feedback you write on to their assignments, other than to sometimes remind them of your oral debriefing.
* Since you’re now marking the pile of assignments in a third of the time it would otherwise have taken, it’s likely you’ll be able to get the marked work back to the class much more quickly than hitherto, which means that students are getting the rest of the feedback while the assignment has not completely faded from their minds.
* Your growing collection of feedback sheets continues to be available as evidence of your good teaching practice, and can be included in submissions to external examiners, professional bodies and in your appraisal or review documentation.

## Now for those ‘yes, buts...’!

**‘But what about students who don’t hand it in on time?’**

There are no extensions! The real world works on deadlines – for funding bids, conference contributions, job interviews, and so on. It’s good to train students to meet deadlines. Deadlines are deadlines are deadlines. A number of universities I know have now abandoned ‘mitigating circumstances’, ‘extensions’, and so on. It’s worth reminding students that there are quite clear links between punctuality and excellence! Long ago, when marking laboratory scripts, I used to say to my students that ‘The marks for the scripts will be more or less in the order you hand them in. First in gets the highest mark, and so on.’ In fact, it surprised me how frequently the first scripts to be handed in were the best ones.

You can, however, explain to your students in advance that anyone who misses the deadline is not completely stuffed. They have the opportunity to do ‘Alternative Assignment B’ instead, which more or less addresses the same learning outcomes as the original but where the coloured feedback sheet for the original ‘Assiignment A’ will be of no help. They then hand the alternative assignment in at another deadline. (You may find ways of giving subtle hints making alternative assignment B somehow less attractive than the original assignment!) Assignments A and B can be issued at the same time, so that students who know they’re going to have a real problem with Deadline A (family crisis, illness, whatever) can set their sights on Deadline B.

With a large group, don’t be surprised if three students will approach you and say ‘Is it OK for me to have a go at both Assignment A *and* Assignment B please?’ I always used to reply ‘Of course’. And to the one student who will turn back to you after the other two have gone and say ‘And can I be credited to whichever assignment I get the best mark for?’ I naturally used to reply ‘Of course’!! These students are often the higher-fliers in any case.

Putting late submissions and extensions into perspective, think of it this way. Imagine you had 100 students, and 95 of them handed the work in at the deadline of 1003 on Tuesday, but five of them were not there. If you delayed the issue of the ‘blue sheet’ till next week while you waited for the five missing assignments, you would be depriving 95 students of the very strong benefits of feedback within 24 hours. This is educationally irresponsible, to say the least.

**‘If the feedback on the coloured sheet is so valuable, why can’t we give out this guidance in advance of students doing the assignment?’**

We can indeed give out the guidance in advance – but it doesn’t work! Even when students have detailed guidance, many of them read it but soon get so busy doing the assignment that they ignore or forget most of the guidance and still get into the (anticipated) difficulties that the coloured feedback sheet addresses. If in doubt about this, give out the blue sheet three weeks before setting the assignment, simply saying ‘Keep this safe, it will be useful to you’. Then at 10.03 on the hand-in date, issue the same blue sheet again, and listen to the chorus of surprised, plaintive comments ‘I never noticed *that* on the blue sheet!’ Feedback only really seems to work *after* students have done something.

# Feedback for high-fliers and for low-fliers

Some feedback processes are much more suitable for successful learners than struggling learners. For example, just a mark or a grade may be all that is needed by high-fliers, while a combination of written and oral feedback may be much more suitable for learners who need significant help. At the same time, learners without any problems may find it irritating to be given detailed feedback on things they have already mastered. However, learners without problems may equally feel short-changed if their less able course mates are seen to be getting more time and attention from tutors. An appropriate balance needs to be struck, where high-fliers get useful feedback too – perhaps a combination of positive comments about their work *and* some constructive suggestions about how they can make their next piece of work even better. It is well known how desolate a learner can feel when, having consistently achieved ‘A’ grades, an out-of-the-blue ‘B’ grade hits them. This can all too often be tracked down to a lack of tutors explaining to them *why* they had been achieving ‘A’ grades to date. ‘If you don’t know how you did it, you’re less likely to be able to do it again.’

# Formative and summative feedback

So far in this chapter, most of the discussion has been about feedback in formative assessment contexts. Another dimension which is useful to explore when reviewing the range of feedback approaches available to us is the question of which processes best lend themselves to providing formative feedback and which are more suitable for summative feedback? In some cases, the conclusions are obvious. For example, ‘just a mark or grade’ serves summative purposes and ‘suggestions for your next assignment’ serves formative purposes. However, some are much more complex, and the feedback associated with peer assessment, for example, can play a significant formative role even when it is received in contexts where the overt intention is closer to being summative. This is partly because, in some contexts, learners may actually take on board more deeply things they learn from each other, where there is no ‘authoritarian’ agenda present, than from when they receive feedback directly from their tutors.

Formative and summative assessment processes can be regarded as two ends of a continuum. All too often, for example, what sets out to be formative feedback ends up as summative feedback. For example, when learners don’t get the feedback until they have already moved on to another topic or another module, they are very unlikely to take any notice of formative feedback given on work from weeks (sometimes months) ago, and the feedback ends up as no more than summative. In other words, learners may notice the mark or grade, but not bother to read the hard-wrought comments their assessors may have added to their work. It can be argued that there is very little point providing detailed formative feedback if no notice will be taken of it, and that it would, in such circumstances, be just as well to limit things to marks or grades and spend the time saved on providing *real* formative feedback on ongoing work, where learners have the opportunity to make good use of the feedback in improving and developing their work accordingly.

One way of helping learners to put feedback to better use is to cause them to reflect on feedback, and evidence their reflections as part of an ongoing process of becoming increasingly conscious of how they learn – and in this case increasing their awareness of how much they can in fact gain from feedback on their assessed work. The following reflective checklists can be used as a starting point to design your own reflection devices to allow learners to develop their approaches to planning their work and making the most of your feedback. It works all the better if you can persuade learners to allow *you* to see copies of their reflections, so that you too can help them further to develop their approaches to assessed work, and improve how you design feedback for them in future.

# Designing feedback in response to poor work

This is the most delicate of feedback tasks. Suppose you’re in a position of needing to write feedback comments to a learner whose *first* assignment you’ve just marked. It was a poor assignment. It would be considered a fail. Suppose, furthermore, that circumstances dictate that you have no alternative to giving this feedback in writing (or email) and you’ve got to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard to compose a feedback missive to the learner concerned. Under normal circumstances, you would be wise to choose *not* to put this particular element of feedback into writing or print, and to see the learner face to face to handle this difficult situation with all the tact and sensitivity you could muster. But perhaps the learner concerned is away on a work placement, or perhaps there’s just no way the two of you can get together for a face-to-face meeting in the immediate future and the feedback needs to be given sooner rather than later. Your choice of words can be critical.

At staff development workshops, I often charge participants with this difficult task, and ask them to compose a feedback letter or email dealing with the issue. I then ask them to swap letters so that they now have no idea whose they have in their hands. Next, I ask them to read aloud the letter or email they now have – but with a difference. I ask them to read it out in a sinister, threatening, menacing manner! This is to simulate how the well-intentioned language used in the document might come across to the learner concerned, who may already know the work was poor, may be having a ‘bad day’ and may be on the point of discontinuing their studies altogether.

It is surprising how threatening some quite ordinary words can be in this context. Words which are often followed by bad news include ‘however’, ‘unfortunately’ and even plain ‘but’. There is, of course, no way that the use of these ‘caution’ words can be avoided, but it is worth reminding tutors that such words can cause learners’ spirits to fall as they read feedback responses.

Then there’s ‘power language’ which often creeps in. For example ‘submit your next attempt’ or ‘resubmit your assignment after…’, and so on. The word ‘submit’ puts the tutor on a pedestal and the learner much lower down. ‘Send me your next version’ is so much milder somehow.

And there are the fatal phrases, possibly the worst imaginable of which is ‘You’ve failed to grasp the basics of…’. This position seems beyond all hope, when read out in a sufficiently sinister way! Surprisingly, some well-intentioned ploys to soften the blow of delivering feedback on poor work can also lead to disaster. Phrases such as ‘You’ve obviously put a lot of effort into…’ or ‘Clearly, you spend a lot of time on…’ bring their own dangers. In particular, what if they hadn’t? What if they rushed the assignment off at the eleventh hour, and here they find the tutor responding ‘Obviously, you’ve spent a lot of time …’? There is no quicker or more sure-fire way of losing credibility as a tutor! That learner will never trust you again.

# Using feedback to make learning happen: 20 ways forward for tutors

To summarise some of the main ideas in this chapter, here are 20 recommendations about feedback for tutors. You may well be able to add yet more to this list.

 1. *Help learners* *to* want *feedback*. Spend time and energy helping learners to understand the importance of feedback and the value of spending some time after receiving work back to learn from the experience. Most learners don’t do this at the moment, concentrating principally on the mark.

 2. *Get the timing right.* Aim to get feedback on work back to learners very quickly, while they still care and while there is still time for them to do something with it. The longer learners have to wait to get work back, especially if they have moved into another semester by the time they receive their returned scripts, the less likely it is that they will do something constructive with the lecturer’s hard-written comments. It could be useful to consider a policy not to give detailed written feedback to learners on work that is handed back at the end of the semester if that area of study is no longer being followed by the learner, and to concentrate on giving more incremental feedback throughout the semester.

 3. *Provide learners with a list of feedback comments given to a similar assignment or essay prior to them submitting their own.* You can then ask learners, for example, in a large-group session, to attempt to work out what sort of marks an essay with these kinds of comments might be awarded. This helps them to see the links between feedback comments and levels of achievement, and can encourage them to be more receptive to constructive but critical comments on their own future work.

 4. *Make feedback interesting!* Learners are much more likely to study feedback properly if they find it stimulating to read and feel it is personal to them, and not just routine or mundane. It takes more time to make feedback interesting, but if it makes the difference between learners making good use of it or not, it is time well spent.

 5. *Give at least* some *feedback straight away.* Explore the possibilities of giving learners at least *some* feedback at the time they hand in their work for marking. For example, a page or two of comments responding to ‘frequently occurring problems’ with the assignment they are handing in, or illustrative details along the lines ‘A good answer would include…’ can give learners some useful feedback while their work on the assignment is still fresh in their minds, and can keep them going until they receive the detailed and individual feedback on their own attempts in due course. Giving ‘generic’ feedback at the time of submission in this way can also reduce the time it takes to mark learners’ work, as there is then no need to repeat on script after script the matters that have already been addressed by the generic feedback, and tutors can concentrate their time and energy on responding to the individual learner’s work, and giving specific feedback on *their* strengths and weaknesses.

 6. *Let learners have feedback comments on their assignments prior to them receiving the actual mark.* Encourage them to use the feedback comments to estimate what kind of mark they will receive. This can then be used as the basis of an individual or group dialogue on how marks or grades are worked out.

 7. *Get learners to look back positively after receiving your feedback.* For example, ask them to revisit their work and identify what were their most successful parts of the assignment on the basis of having now read your feedback. Sometimes learners are so busy reading and feeling depressed by the negative comments that they fail to see that there are positive aspects too.

 8. *Ask learners to respond selectively to your feedback on their assignments*. This can, for example, include asking them to complete sentences such as:

‘The part of the feedback that puzzled me most was…’

‘The comment that rang most true for me was…’

‘I don’t get what you mean when you say…’

‘I would welcome some advice on…’.

 9. *Ask learners to send you, confidentially, an email after they have received your feedback, focusing on their feelings*. In particular, this might help you to understand what emotional impact your feedback is having on individual learners. It can be useful to give them a menu of words and phrases to underline or ring, perhaps including: ‘exhilarated’, ‘very pleased’, ‘miserable’, ‘shocked’, ‘surprised’, ‘encouraged’, ‘disappointed’, ‘helped’, ‘daunted’, ‘relieved’, and others.

10. *Don’t miss out on noticing the difference.* Comment positively where you can see that learners have incorporated action resulting from your advice given on their previous assignment. This will encourage them to see the learning and assessment processes as continuous.

11. *Make use of the speed and power of technology.* Explore the uses of computer-assisted formative assessment. While a number of universities, including Bedfordshire, Plymouth and the Open University, are using computer-assisted assessment summatively, many would argue that it is currently most powerfully used to support formative feedback, often automatically generated by email. Learners seem to really like having the chance to find out how they are doing, and attempt tests several times in an environment where no one else is watching how they do. They may be more willing to maximize the benefits of learning through mistakes when their errors can be made in the comfort of privacy, and when they can get quick feedback on these before they have built them into their work. Of course, many computer-assisted assessment systems allow you to monitor what is going on across a cohort, enabling you to concentrate your energies either on learners who are repeatedly doing badly or those who are not engaging at all in the activity.

12. *Link feedback directly to the achievement of intended learning outcomes.* Explore ways in which formative assessment can be made integral to learning. Too often assessment is bolted on, but the more we can constructively align (Biggs and Tang, 2011) assignments with planned learning outcomes and the curriculum taught, the more learners are likely to perceive them as authentic and worth bothering with. Giving learners feedback specifically on the level of their achievement of learning outcomes helps them to develop the habit of making better use of the learning outcomes as targets, as they continue to study.

13. *Provide most feedback at the beginning.* Investigate how learning can be advanced in small steps using a ‘scaffolding’ approach. This means providing lots of support in the early stages which can then be progressively removed as learners become more confident in their own abilities.

14. *Use feedback to let learners know what style of work is expected of them.* Devote energy to helping learners understand what is required of them in terms of writing, that is, work with them to understand the various academic discourses that are employed within the institution, and help them to understand when writing needs to be personal and based on individual experience, such as in a reflective log, and when it needs to be formal and use academic conventions such as passive voice and third person, as in written reports and essays.

15. *Use feedback to help learners learn how best to use different kinds of source materials.* Help them also to understand that there are different kinds of approaches needed for reading, depending on whether they are reading for pleasure, for information, for understanding or reading around a topic. Help them to become active readers, with a pen and post-its in hand, rather than passive readers, fitting the task in alongside television and other noisy distractions.

16. *Take care with the important words.* Ensure that the language you use when giving feedback to learners avoids destructive criticism of the person rather than the work being assessed. Boud (1995) talks about the disadvantages of using ‘final language’, that is, language that is judgemental to the point of leaving learners nowhere to go. Words like ‘appalling’, ‘disastrous’ and ‘incompetent’ fall into this area, but so also do words like ‘incomparable’ and ‘unimprovable’ if they don’t also help outstanding learners to develop ipsatively – i.e. build yet further on their already high achievements.

17. *When possible, use feedback in rehearsal contexts.* Consider providing opportunities for resubmissions of work as part of a planned programme. Learners often feel they could do better work once they have seen the formative feedback and would like the chance to have another go. Particularly at the early stages of a programme, consider offering them the chance to use formative feedback productively. Feedback often involves a change of orientation, not just the remediation of errors.

18. *Get learners* giving *feedback, not just receiving it.* Think about ways of getting learners to give each other formative feedback. The act of giving feedback often causes deeper thinking than just receiving feedback. Involve learners in their own and each other’s assessment. Reflection is not a luxury; it is the best means available to help them really get inside the criteria and understand the often hidden ‘rules of the game’ of higher education. In particular, asking learners to review each other’s draft material prior to submission can be really helpful for all learners, but particularly those who lack confidence about what kinds of things are expected of them.

19. *Cause learners to build on your feedback.* For example, ask them to include with their next assignment an indication of how they have incorporated your feedback from the last one into the present one.

20. *Encourage learners to analyse, systematically, all the feedback they get.* Explain how useful it is for them to identify recurring trends, for example similar comments given to them by different tutors. Above all, encourage learners to identify their strengths, as indicated by recurring feedback, so that they can aim to demonstrate these strengths again and again quite purposefully.

Finally, how best can you help your own students to make the most of feedback. You could give them the following suggestions, adapted from ‘How to Study’ (Race, 2003) – or much better, fine-tune some of the ideas below with your own tips for your students.

**Tips for Students: Making the most of your feedback**

Feedback is important. You’ll get lots of feedback, and this can really deepen your learning. But you need to be *looking* for feedback to get the most from it. And you need to be *receptive* to it when you get it. The following tips can help you make the most of feedback.

**Feedback in general**

1. *Regard all feedback as valuable.* Whether feedback is in the form of praise or criticism, you will get a lot more out of it if you value it.
2. *Feedback from anyone is useful.* While it’s understandable to regard the feedback you get from lecturers and tutors as authoritative, you can also get feedback all the time from fellow students, and other people around you.
3. *Don’t shrug off positive feedback.* When you’re complimented on your work, there’s a temptation to try to ease any feeling of embarrassment by saying ‘we’ll, it’s not *so* special really’ or so on. The problem with doing this is that *you* then start to believe this. It’s much better to allow yourself to swell with pride, at least for a little while. This helps you to accept the positive feedback, and to build upon it and do even better next time perhaps.
4. *Practise thanking people for their positive feedback.* Simply saying, ‘thanks, I’m glad you liked that’ can be enough sometimes. When people are thanked for giving you praise or compliments, they’re more likely to do so again, and this means more and better feedback for you.
5. *Don’t get defensive when feedback is critical.* It’s perfectly natural to try to protect yourself from the hurt of critical feedback, but the problem then is that this interferes with the flow of critical feedback to you. The more you can gently probe for even more feedback, the more useful the feedback turns out to be.
6. *Thank people for critical feedback too.* Even when you’re not actually too pleased with the critical feedback you’ve just received, it can be useful to say something along the lines ‘well, thanks for telling me about this, it should be useful for me in future’ and so on.
7. *Don’t just wait for feedback, ask for it.* Don’t lose any opportunities to press gently for even more feedback than you already have received. Ask questions, such as ‘what do you think was the best thing I did here?’ and ‘what would have been the most useful change I should make next time I do something similar’, and so on.
8. *Before you finish an assignment, look back at the feedback you’ve already received so far.* You can often polish up that assignment quite quickly, and avoid some of the things which caused you to lose marks last time.

# Getting your marked work back!

1. *Decide to regard it as an important feedback opportunity.* If you really *want* to learn from whatever feedback you get, you’re much more likely to make the most of it.
2. *Acknowledge that when you get your work back with a grade, your feelings may run high.* It’s not unknown for a student to take a marked assignment to a place outside, set fire to it, and then stamp on it! That may indeed make people feel better, but it’s a lost learning opportunity (and could be dangerous of course).
3. *Don’t take too much notice of the mark or grade you’re given.* There is, of course, nothing you can now *do* about whatever mark or grade you were given. The opportunity is to learn about *why* you got whatever mark or grade you were given. This can help tremendously with your next assignment.
4. *Don’t become defensive.* It’s all too easy to look at every critical comment as a personal affront. Remind yourself that any critical comments are about *what you wrote,* not about you as a human being. You can change what you write next time. You don’t have to try to change who you are!
5. *If your mark wasn’t good, find out exactly why.* We learn at least as much through getting things wrong as we do through getting them right. And even if your mark was poor, look carefully for any clues regarding where you did in fact score the marks you got.
6. *Don’t be too smug if your mark or grade is good.* Try to work out *why* your work scored well. What did you do that pleased your assessors? How best can you put such things to work again in your next assignment? And even if you did very well indeed, continue to look for what you might have done to make your work even better.
7. *Put it away for a while, then look at it again.* The real problem with feedback and marks together is that the marks cloud the picture. When your mind is full of thoughts about getting a high mark (or a low mark), you don’t have room to really benefit from the feedback about your work. Once you’ve got used to whatever mark you were awarded, you will find you are much better able to look dispassionately at the feedback, and get maximum value from it.
8. *Don’t rest on your laurels.* ‘Pride comes before a fall’, and so on. If you got a really high mark or grade this time, the chances are that you’ll have to work really hard to improve on it – or even to equal it again. Indeed, the chances are that your next mark won’t be quite so good. Then you’ll be disappointed of course. But you can minimise that pain by learning as much as you can now about *why* you did well the first time.
9. *Analyse your mark or grade against the marking scheme.* Sometimes you’ll have access to quite a lot of detail about how the marks were allocated for the assignment. See where your work scored well alongside particular assessment criteria. More important, look at where you *didn’t* score well. Try to work out *why* you missed particular marks. This will be really useful for next time round.
10. *Try to look at the feedback fellow-students received too.* In fact, it’s sometimes easier for you to make sense of the feedback comments on other people’s work – you’re not too close to that work to have your judgement clouded by emotions. At the same time, fellow-students may be able to give you useful insights into the real meaning of feedback comments written on your own work. Besides, looking at other people’s marked assignments tells you yet more about the overall ‘rules of the game’ regarding getting good marks for assignments. The better you become acquainted with these rules, the more marks you can get next time – and indeed in exams too.
11. *Don’t be afraid to seek clarification.* If you can’t understand some of the feedback comments written on your work, find an appropriate time to ask about them. Be careful, however, not to come across as if asking for higher marks. And don’t harangue your assessors in corridors or at the end of lectures. Don’t make them feel as though their judgement is being challenged – that certainly doesn’t help you to endear yourself to them! Make an appointment to see them, so that they have time to explain to you anything you *need* them to explain.
12. *Make yourself an action plan.* For each assignment you have marked, jot down three things you’ve learned to try to do again next time round, and three things to try to avoid in future. Then you can really let the assignment go, as a useful learning experience, and hang on to your learning, rather than that mark or grade. Now file that assignment, but keep your action plan.

**Extracts from Chapter 2 of ‘The Lecturer’s Toolkit: 4th edition (2015) (Routledge)**

*Most of Chapter 2 in the book is on assessment design, but for the purposes of these extracts I have selected only the part of the chapter which looks in some depth about the pros and cons of various ways of getting feedback to students.*

**Towards a strategy for choosing feedback processes**

Any strategy is essentially a combination of tactics. You can choose your feedback tactics from a wide variety of processes, each with its own advantages and drawbacks in the particular contexts in which you might choose to use it. The pages which follow can be used as starting points for colleagues to explore the pros and cons of their own preferred methods of giving feedback. But don’t forget to keep asking students about which feedback processes *they* find most valuable – they can always tell us.

**Feedback in writing or print**

This is about hard-copy feedback, whether written directly onto students’ assessed work, or supplied in writing or print alongside returned work. (We’ll explore emailed or online feedback and the use of ‘track-changes’ shortly; the present section is essentially about old-fashioned feedback, which still happens!). A clear advantage of hard-copy feedback is that it is enduring, and can be viewed and reviewed again by students (and indeed by assessors themselves and quality reviewers). However, a clear *disadvantage* with hard-copy feedback is that it is enduring! A batch of feedback comments to different students can endure quite long enough for each and every inconsistency we make to be used against us in evidence. In the pages which follow, we’ll explore half a dozen of the range of processes involving feedback in writing or print. You’ll be able to think of other ways of combining these, and alternatives which may have more advantages and fewer drawbacks.

1. *Handwritten comments on (or about) students’ assessed work*

This is one of the most widely used forms of feedback to students. It includes our written feedback on essays, reports, dissertations, solutions to problems, and so on. Not so long ago, there were few alternatives to this way of giving students feedback on their work, usually accompanied by an assessment judgement of one kind or another.

ADVANTAGES

* Feedback can be personal, individual, and directly related to the particular piece of work.
* Students may regard this sort of feedback as authoritative and credible.
* The feedback can be tailored to justify an accompanying assessment judgement.
* Students can refer to the feedback again and again, and continue to learn from it.
* Such feedback provides useful evidence for external scrutiny, for example external examiners, professional bodies, and so on.

DISADVANTAGES

* Handwritten feedback takes ages to do, and can be hard to read!
* If our handwritten comments are on their work, *we* lose it when we return their work, and can easily forget what we said to whom.
* There may not be enough space, when squeezing handwritten comments between lines or in margins in students’ work.
* When critical, handwritten feedback because of its authoritativeness – can be threatening.
* It becomes too tempting to degenerate into shorthand – ticks and crosses – rather than to express positive and critical comments.
1. *Post-its stuck to students’ work*

This is an alternative to handwritten comments, and has a few additional pros and cons.

ADVANTAGES

* Students’ work isn’t ‘defaced’, and they can remove the post-its when they’ve served their purpose.
* The post-its can be stuck at the right place, so as to clearly indicate which part of the work is being referred to.

DISADVANTAGES

* If a detailed comment is needed, a post-it may not be large enough.
* Post-its could get accidentally detached before students get their work back.
1. *Word-processed overall comments on each student’s assessed work*

This is feedback which you compose, then print out (or email) for each student, summarising your reactions to their work. It may be accompanied by an assessment judgement.

ADVANTAGES

* Such feedback can remain individual, personal and authoritative.
* It is easier to paste in pre-prepared statements, from a bank of such statements you’ve already prepared.
* When you compose an important new comment for a particular instance, you can copy it to your statement bank for when you may need it again.
* Students can refer to your comments time and time again.
* It is much easier to read than handwriting.
* You can keep copies (paper or electronic) and refer to it easily again.
* It provides useful evidence for external scrutiny.

DISADVANTAGES

* Printed feedback can still be threatening to students when critical.
* It may appear less personal to students than handwritten feedback.
* It is not so easy to link each feedback point to the exact part of the work which caused you to write it.
* The ‘cut and paste’ elements may show up too strongly to external reviewers, if they have been used too widely.
* It’s not so easy to make *emphasis* in word-processed feedback, so that the most important messages stand out from those that are merely routine.
1. *‘Track-changes’ feedback on work returned to students electronically*

Despite the fact that ‘track-changes’ is normally used in one-to-one editing and feedback (for example on draft theses, dissertations, reports and so on) it seems likely that ‘track-changes’ feedback is already well on the way towards replacing ‘handwritten comments on students’ work in assessment in general. This discussion is about using the ‘track-changes’ function in word-processing software to give students feedback when marking their work. This is normally when tutors use the ‘track changes’ facilities to return to students their original word-processed assignments, duly edited with feedback comments which appear on-screen in another colour. The level of feedback can range from comments providing simple qualitative overall feedback on the whole document or on selected paragraphs or sentences, to very detailed feedback on individual words or phrases. This kind of feedback remains very valuable for large-scale work (essays, dissertations, long reports, drafts of articles for publication and so on).

The other side of ‘track-changes’ is where deletions, additions, replaced words or phrases can be suggested, and the original author can accept or reject each change in turn, working towards a ‘final’ version. This is most useful when (for example) supervisors are editing drafts for students to then improve so they can produce a post-feedback edition of their work if they wish (or they can be required to do so as part of the overall assessment process). The ‘track-changes’ function used in this way can give students feedback about their wording, grammar, spelling, punctuation, but the ‘comments’ function is more widely used when the main purpose is feedback rather than working towards a better draft.
The discussion below is essentially about a batch of student work being marked with the feedback sent electronically either stage by stage during the marking or when the marking is completed. For feedback synchronously during students’ work, and for collaborative work where students can comment on each others’ work, ‘Google Docs’ can be a much richer way for sharing comments, and lead all involved towards improved drafts.

ADVANTAGES

* Comments and changes using ‘track-changes’ is a way of providing feedback while avoiding defacing students’ work by writing on it.
* It is a way of providing the kind of feedback students really want – demonstrably individual feedback on their own particular pieces of work, rather than generic feedback to the whole cohort.
* You can distinguish between ‘corrections’ and ‘comments’, as explained above.
* With the ‘comments’ function you can highlight a whole section and make broad observations – students then appreciate that you have read/understood the broader aspects, and have not just focussed on the nitty-gritty errors.
* You can send the edited work back to any student at any convenient time or place as you’re assessing their work, rather than having to wait till a whole batch of work is returned. (Caution: you may find your assessing develops during a batch of work, so it can be premature to return too early the first pieces of work you mark).
* You have the opportunity to edit your feedback before you finally send it – how often have we (when using handwritten feedback) written quite a lot of feedback down, only to find that the student went on to address the point concerned a paragraph or page later!
* Students can open the marked work at a time and place when they’re ready, and usually choose to take in your feedback in the relative comfort of privacy.
* You can tailor your feedback to individual students’ needs, strengths and weaknesses.
* Students can refer back to your feedback again and again.
* You can keep track of what feedback you have given to which students by saving the marked-up files (except of course where marking is anonymous, but even then you can keep track of which comments you made on which piece of work).
* You can use electronic cut and paste where different students need similar advice, gradually preparing a master copy of a bank of frequently needed comments to select from, and save yourself having to type out such messages more than once.
* Students can reply directly to you *about* your feedback (where marking isn’t anonymous).
* Useful evidence of feedback is built up relatively automatically, if needed for external review.
* You can revise comments while marking, for example when it becomes clear that a particular difficulty is widespread in the work of different students.
* Comments on-screen can be far more legible than handwriting, and can still clearly point to the exact part of the student’s work being discussed.
* Using the ‘next’ function, students can work their way systematically through successive changes or comments, seeing where they relate to their original work one at a time, and therefore it is easier (despite the messy overall appearance of loads of comments on the screen) to think about each in turn. They can also back-track to the ‘previous’ comment or changes when they wish to.
* Students can choose to ‘accept’ or ‘reject’ changes, and can choose to ‘delete’ comments when they wish (though it’s worth cautioning them that it’s best if they don’t delete comments in the heat of the moment if they disagree with them!).
* This way of marking means that you don’t have to carry piles of work around with you, and can have the work available online or on a memory stick, and can do some of the marking at any time and at any place when you’re at a computer containing the files. This also means you can tackle marking large batches incrementally, rather than being confined to a single marking place.
* Obviously, most of these advantages relate to just ‘marking’ rather than ‘assessing’, and you still face the task of making informed judgements about students’ work, at least partly on the basis of the feedback comments you have provided, and the changes you might have suggested.
* When you come to making assessment judgements on the overall piece, you can scroll up and down your comments to remind you about your views of the main trends in the work.

DISADVANTAGES

* If there are lots of comments and changes, the feedback can look very intimidating and confusing (‘like an overly-critical spider’s web’ is one reaction!).
* The default setting is usually that comments and changes appear in red! (However, settings on the software can be revised, and green or blue can be much less intimidating. You may have to help students to work out how best to change the settings, as they may have already used track-changes when producing the work in the first place, and this can affect the colour settings they see for your comments).
* With ‘changes’ you end up taking responsibility for putting right the student’s minor errors, and they become passive recipients of this, without having to take an active role – the text also looks messier than if you suggested the change on a post-it or in a margin comment and left it up to them to do something (active revision).
* Students can only see this feedback when at a computer, and may forget quite a lot of the detail.
* With long pieces of work, students can only see a few comments at a time, and can lose track of general themes in the feedback being offered.
* Comments are usually in the same size of font, so it is harder to make particular words stand out (as you could have done in handwritten comments). However, you’ve still normally got **bold, *italic,* underline,** and so on to play with, so it is not impossible to make due emphasis apparent when necessary.
* It can be quite tiresome marking a large batch of students’ work at a computer.
* It is harder to follow up ‘track-changes’ feedback face-to-face with a student, as you both need to be able to see the comments together.
* Students (and yourself!) may need a little practice before getting into the swing of using track-changes well.
* Some students may be using different software to that which you’re using, or have different versions of the same software. Some students may be using quite different kinds of computer (e.g. Mac versus PC).
* Students without their own computers may have limited access to networked computers, and may then be somewhat rushed when they have opportunities to receive your feedback.
* Students may not treat your feedback as seriously as if it were face-to-face, or on printed or handwritten paper.
* Students are more likely to ‘lose’ emailed feedback than printed or handwritten feedback; in other words they tend to fail to file it and store it systematically.
* Although a print-out bearing all the changes and comments is possible as a last resort, this can be very hard on the eye.
1. *Model answers or solutions, issued to students along with their marked work*

This category covers a wide range of feedback aids, including specimen answers, perhaps supported by ‘commentary’ notes highlighting principal matters arising with students’ work as a whole, worked solutions to calculations or problems, and so on. Model answers or solutions can be provided on paper or online, and the timing can be controlled – e.g. to just after students have submitted their own work.

ADVANTAGES

* Students can use model answers to revisit their own work in self-assessment mode, and can continue to use them as a frame of reference illustrating the standards they are working towards.
* Model answers can save you a lot of time writing individual feedback or explanation to students.
* You can build up a model solution with commentary while you’re actually marking a large batch of students’ work, putting your remarks into the commentary rather than on individuals’ work.
* You can build up model solutions by directly using (with due anonymity) students’ work, with their permission of course.
* You can also build up ‘how not to do this’ examples from students’ actual work (but you really do need their permission and blessing to do this).
* They can be issued to students who missed an assignment, or for reference by students who may have been exempted from it.
* They constitute useful evidence of standards and expectations, both for students and for external quality reviewers.

DISADVANTAGES

* Because model answers or solutions are relatively impersonal, some students will not really engage in comparing their own work to them.
* Students who do the assignment equally well overall, but in different ways, may feel that their individuality is not being valued or recognised.
* Students may assume that the model answers represent all that they need to know about the topic on which the assignment was based.
* Students who missed out an important aspect in their own work may not notice the significance of this, and may still need further feedback about their own particular strengths and weaknesses.
* If the same assignment is used again within a year or two, there may be clear evidence that the model answers are still in circulation!
1. *Assignment return sheets*

These are normally pre-prepared proformas, most often a single sheet of paper or web-screen, where you provide detailed written or word-processed, or electronic feedback comments to students on each of a number of assessment criteria applied to their work. Alternatively, these can contain Likert-scale ratings against individual qualities of the work concerned, with columns indicating such judgements as ‘really well done’, ‘quite well done’, ‘not well done’ and so on. A mixture of items with ‘free comments’ and ‘judgements’ can be used as appropriate.

ADVANTAGES

* You can plan to address each of the most important or recurring feedback agendas, without having to write out the context, or the relevant criteria, each time.
* Students can compare the feedback they receive with that received by peers, on the basis of each separate criterion if they wish.
* You can copy the assignment return sheets, and keep them for your own records (and for external scrutiny) much more easily than you could keep copies of whole assignments along with your written feedback.
* The essential parts of the feedback agenda can clarified by the assignment return sheets, giving students a frame of reference for what is expected of them in similar assignments in future.
* The elements of the assignment return sheets can be fine-tuned to reflect the intended learning outcomes associated with the assessed work (particularly welcomed by quality reviewers seeking connections between assessment criteria and published learning outcomes).

DISADVANTAGES

* Not all of the feedback you wish in practice to give to individual students is likely to relate to the anticipated agendas of an assignment return sheet.
* Students may question you about the differences in their scores or grades. (Though this is of course the case in most feedback methods – it just seems to happen more often when different students all have a similar-looking sheet, and are more likely to compare with each other).
* You may have to find other ways to keep for your own records (and for external review) the individual feedback that you add for students.
* Any pre-prepared agenda is likely to be found to be inappropriate for at least some of the assignments, for example students who do the assignment very well but in an unanticipated way, or students whose work meets the published agenda but where you feel that they still have not actually understood what they are doing (or suspect that plagiarism has occurred).
1. *Word-processed overall class reports on an assignment*

These might be issued to a whole (large) group of students, after their work has been marked, along with (or even in advance of) returning to them their marked work. Ideally, such an overall report can be debriefed in a whole-group session with the students. These reports can also be made available online.

ADVANTAGES

* Students can look back at the report again and again as necessary.
* Students can learn from the feedback on mistakes or inadequacies of *other* students’ work, and find out from the report about difficulties which were commonly encountered.
* Such reports can save you from having to write repeatedly the same feedback messages in response to commonly occurring mistakes.
* Writing such feedback reports causes you to reflect in some detail on overall student performance in the particular assignment concerned, and can show this to significant others (for example quality reviewers).
* You could issue a past report to the next cohort of students, alerting them in advance to some things to bear in mind when they tackle a forthcoming similar assessment.

DISADVANTAGES

* Feedback to students is much less personal than is possible using some of the other processes described elsewhere on these pages, and will tend to concentrate on commonly occurring features in the work of the cohort, and may miss out on individuality shown by some of the stronger students.
* Students may think that the only important points they need to bear in mind are contained in the report.
* If some students are likely to submit their work late, you may need to delay issuing the report (or even have to make further adjustments to it), resulting in the main body of students experiencing delay in receiving feedback, and a loss of the ‘fresh in mind’ dimension when they compare the report with their own work.
1. *Codes written on students’ work, debriefed in a whole-group session*

For example, instead of writing individual positive or critical comments directly onto students’ work, write only a code (a letter, or a number, or a symbol), and alongside compile your ‘glossary of codes’ on overheads, paper or PowerPoint slides, to use when you debrief the work to the whole group (and to issue as a translation device, so that students can revisit their work and remind themselves of your feedback.

ADVANTAGES

* This can save you a very significant amount of time and energy when ‘hand-marking’ a set of assignments, as in principle you only need to spell out each common feedback comment once (in your glossary, rather than on their work).
* When addressing common errors or misunderstandings, you can take more time to adjust your feedback messages to make them really understandable.
* it’s usually much easier to insert a code letter, number or symbol, in the space available between their lines, than might have been possible to squeeze in the comment you wish to make to a student. This means that students see exactly where the feedback comment relates to their own work.
* Students get their work back without it being covered with feedback wording, which might have looked more threatening (we all tend to see any critical comments first).
* In your debriefing with the whole group, you can go through each of the important codes one at a time, meaning that all of the students to whom the message is directed get the translation of their code at the same moment. This point-by-point debriefing focuses students’ attention much more sharply than when general debriefings are given. For example, until you reveal your message, *all* students with a ‘W’ written once or more on their work will be trying to work out for themselves what that ‘W’ might mean.

DISADVANTAGES

* It is harder for you to remember which students made which misunderstandings or mistakes (unless you photocopy their work with your codes on it, or make some sort of grid recording the codes used for each student).
* Students may lose the glossary you issue to them, or may not go to the trouble of re-translating your codes when they review their work later.
* The process of debriefing can be boring to the better students who made few of the errors or misunderstandings which you explain to the rest of the cohort.

**Face-to-face feedback**

Face-to-face feedback can carry with it very high learning payoff for students. It can be memorable, and can help students to change attitudes and approaches. Face-to-face feedback (whether to individuals or groups) carries with it the additional explanation that comes through body language, facial expression, tone of voice, emphasis, and so on. Furthermore, in face-to-face feedback situations, *you* have immediate feedback on how your messages are getting across to students. There is also the opportunity for *dialogue;* students can ask you what you mean by particular comments. You can tell a lot about how they are reacting to your feedback from their expressions, body language, and so on. Moreover, you can *adjust* what you say, and how you say it, to respond to your observations of what is happening.

1. *Face-to-face feedback to whole classes*

This includes giving oral feedback to a whole class after having marked their assignments, before or after returning their actual work to them. Alternatively, you can give face-to-face feedback to the whole group about the task immediately after collecting their work from them, but before you’ve marked it, so that they get at least some feedback on the task as soon as possible, while the task is still fresh in their minds.

ADVANTAGES

* You can give a lot of feedback to a lot of students in a relatively short time.
* Feedback is strengthened by tone of voice, facial expression, body language, emphasis, and so on.
* Students can compare reactions to your feedback, especially when you use some discussion in the process.
* Students can question you, and gain clarification about what you’re really getting at when you make a point to the group.
* You can support (and partially evidence) giving feedback to the whole group by issuing a handout summarising the main points you include.

DISADVANTAGES

* Feedback is less individual, personal and intimate to students.
* You can only concentrate on principal feedback matters, and can’t cover less common feedback issues.
* Students records or memories of your feedback may be inaccurate and sketchy, and they may not remember the detail when later they look back over their assessed work.
* Students may be so busy thinking about one particular aspect of your feedback, which they know will apply to their particular work, that they miss other elements as you talk.
1. *Face-to-face feedback to individual students*

This can include one-to-one appointments with students, individual discussions out of class or in practical settings, and so on.

ADVANTAGES

* Feedback is likely to be found to be personal, intimate and authoritative.
* You can address each individual student’s needs, strengths and weaknesses.
* It is often much quicker to talk rather than write or type.
* It is an important feedback mechanism to be able to justify to external reviewers (but of course you’ll need evidence to support your claims for it – for example feedback from students *about* your face-to-face feedback with them).

DISADVANTAGES

* One-to-one face-to-face feedback can be extremely threatening when critical.
* Students may become defensive when receiving critical feedback, and you may feel tempted to go in harder to justify the feedback.
* Students can be embarrassed when receiving positive feedback, and this can cause them not to fully benefit from praise.
* It takes a great deal of time to organise individual appointments with each member of large classes.
* There can be even more time wasted between appointments, and with students who don’t turn up.
* Students often tend to remember only *some* of a feedback interview with an important person like you, often the most critical element, and this may undermine confidence unduly.
* It becomes impossible to remember exactly what you said to whom, when class sizes are large.
1. *Face-to-face feedback to small groups of students*

Such feedback is often timetabled into tutorial sessions, or in group work where students are working on projects or practical tasks. Some of the advantages of face-to-face feedback can be further exploited, and some of the disadvantages of feeding back to individuals are reduced.

ADVANTAGES

* It can be less threatening to students than one-to-one feedback, especially when critical.
* Individuals’ needs can be addressed, while still retaining some degree of relative anonymity within the group.
* Students can learn from the detail of feedback to others in the group, and avoid the problems which others have encountered, and put their own work into context.
* You can enter into detailed discussion if the students in the group wish, so that matters arising are followed up in as much – often more – depth than would have happened with individual one-to-one appointments.

DISADVANTAGES

* Students may not take quite as much notice of feedback to them as members of a group, than they would have done to one-to-one feedback.
* It can be hard to remember to include all the feedback matters which are needed by the group as a whole.
* Discussions may get out of perspective, and result in only part of the intended overall feedback agenda being covered by the group session.

**Electronic feedback**

We’re already looked at ‘track-changes’ feedback under ‘writing or in print’ as track-changes has become one of the principal ways feedback is now given in situations where formerly handwritten comments were provided, but there are even more possibilities. The range and variety of the use of electronic feedback is one of the fastest growth areas in higher education today. Increasingly, tutors are finding that electronic feedback not only speeds up the delivery of feedback, and aids the effectiveness of reception of feedback, but also assists with generating appropriate evidence for the quality of feedback.

1. *Using computer conferences for overall comments on batches of students’ work*

Computer conferences provide the option for one-to-many electronic communication for feedback messages which have relevance to the majority of a group of students, along with the choice to go to one-to-one communication for those parts of feedback messages which are more individual or personal.

ADVANTAGES

* Just about all the advantages of emailed feedback still apply, except the option of responding individually through the conference to each student’s strengths and weaknesses. Even this can, of course, be addressed by adding individualised emails to the computer conference communication.
* Your overall feedback response to an assignment can be sent as it stands to each of many students, who can each receive it when and where it is convenient to them.
* You can save time responding to matters affecting many students, and use some of the time saved to reply separately by email to those students needing more detailed or individual feedback.
* Students can learn from your feedback to *other* issues than the ones which they themselves need to think about.
* Students can reply individually to you about your overall feedback, and (if you structure the conference accordingly) can directly see each other’s responses to your feedback, and generate real conference-type discussion of matters arising from an assignment (and to your own assessment and feedback of the assignment).

DISADVANTAGES

* Students may be less inclined to search through a generalised electronic feedback message for elements which apply to their own work.
* Students replying to the conference about your feedback may feel more exposed than when replying directly to you by email. (Of course there is no reason why you should deny them private communication.)
1. *Computer-delivered feedback*

This broad category includes the use of (pre-prepared) feedback responses to structured self-assessment questions in computer-based learning packages. Computer-based feedback can be programmed into learning packages online.

ADVANTAGES

* Students can work through online learning materials at their own pace, and within limits at their own choice of time and place.
* Feedback to pre-designed tasks can be received almost instantly by students, at the point of entering their decision or choice into the system.
* Computer-based feedback legitimises learning by trial and error, and allows students to learn from mistakes in the comfort of privacy.
* You can prepare detailed feedback in anticipation of the most likely mistakes or misconceptions which you know will be common among your students.
* Students can view the feedback as often as they need it as they work through the materials online.

DISADVANTAGES

* You can not easily tell to what extent individual students are benefiting from the feedback you have designed.
* Students who don’t understand the feedback responses you have designed may not be able to question you further at the time, in the ways they could have used with emailed or computer-conference-based feedback.
* The ‘now you see it, now it’s gone’ syndrome can affect students’ retention of your feedback messages, as students move quickly from one screenful of information to another as they work.

**Reducing your load: short cuts to good feedback**

Many lecturers report that they spend much more time marking students’ work and designing feedback for students than they spend preparing lectures or working with students directly. We’ve seen throughout this chapter how important assessment and feedback are for students. The following suggestions may help you keep various aspects of your marking and feedback activities to a reasonable proportion of your overall work.

***Keep records carefully ...***

Keeping good records of assessment takes time, but can save time in the long run. The following suggestions may help you organise your record-keeping.

1. **Be meticulous about keeping records of marks!** However tired you are at the end of a marking session, record all the marks immediately (or indeed continuously as you go along). Then make sure the marks are stored in different places rather than just with the scripts – for example stored online, *and* in a print-out. Then should any disasters befall you (dog eats marksheets, briefcase stolen, house burned down, computer dies, and so on) there is the chance that you will still have the marks even if you don’t have the scripts any longer (or vice versa).
2. **Be systematic.** Use class lists, when available, as the basis of your records. Otherwise make your own class lists as you go along. File all records of assessment in places where you can find them again – on more than one computer. With paper-based records it is possible to spend as much time looking for missing marksheets as it took to do the original assessment!
3. **Use technology to produce assessment records.** Keep marks on a grid or spreadsheet on a computer, and consider saving by date as a new file every time you add significantly to it, so you are always confident that you are working with the most recent version. Keep paper copies of each important list as an insurance against disaster! Keep backup copies of files or sheets – even simply scanning or photocopying any handwritten list of marks is a valuable precaution.
4. **Use technology to save you from number-crunching.** The use of computer spreadsheet programs can allow the machine to do all of the subtotalling, averaging and data handling for you. If you are afraid to set up a system for yourself, a computer-loving colleague or a member of systems support staff (or indeed a student!) will be delighted to start you off.
5. **Use other people.** Some universities employ administrative staff to issue and collect in work for assessment, and to make up assessment lists and input the data into computers. Partners, friends and even young children can help you check your addition of marks, and help you record the data.

***Reduce your burden ...***

Straightforward ways to lighten your assessment and feedback load are suggested below.

1. **Reduce the number of your assignments.** Are all of them strictly necessary, and is it possible to combine some of them, and completely delete others?
2. **Use shorter assignments.** Often we ask for 2000, 3000 or 5000 word assignments or reports, when a fraction of the length can be just as acceptable. Some essays or long reports could be replaced by shorter reviews, articles, memorandum reports or summaries. Projects can be assessed by poster displays and summary reports instead of long reports, and exam papers can include some sections of short-answer questions and multiple-choice questions particularly where these could be marked by optical mark scanners, or using computer managed assessment directly.
3. **Use assignment return sheets.** These can be pro-formas which contain the assessment criteria for an assignment, with spaces for ticks/crosses, grades, marks and brief comments. They enable rapid feedback on ‘routine’ assessment matters, providing more time for individual comment to students when necessary on deeper aspects of their work.
4. **Consider using statement banks.** These are a means whereby your frequently repeated comments can be composed once each, then printed or emailed to students, or put onto transparencies or slides for discussion in a subsequent lecture.
5. **Involve students in self- or peer-assessment.** Start small, and explain what you are doing and why. Involving students in some of their assessment can provide them with very positive learning experiences, and help them tune into the assessment culture around them.
6. **Mark some exercises in class time using self- or peer-marking.** This is sometimes useful when students expecting tutor-assessment, have prepared work to the standard that they wish to be seen by you.
7. **Don’t count all assessments.** For example, give students the option that their best five out of eight assignments will count as their coursework mark. Students satisfied with their *first* five need not undertake the other three at all then, and students who did not get into their stride in the first couple of assessments can compensate for this.

***And when you still find yourself overloaded ...***

No one wants to have to cope with huge piles of coursework scripts or files, or exam papers. However, not all factors may be within your control, and you may still end up overloaded. The following wrinkles may be somewhat soothing at such times!

1. **If the work is paper-based, put the great unmarked pile *under* your desk.** It is very discouraging to be continually reminded of the magnitude of the overall task. Put only a handful of scripts or assignments in sight – about as many as you might expect to deal with in about an hour.
2. **Set yourself progressive targets.** Plan to accomplish a bit more at each stage than you need to. Build in safety margins. This allows you some insurance against unforeseen disasters (and children), and can allow you to gradually earn some time off as a bonus.
3. **Make an even better marking scheme.** Often, it only becomes possible to make a really good marking scheme after you’ve found out the ways that candidates are actually answering the questions. Put the marking scheme where you can see it easily. It can be useful to paste it up with sticky tack above your desk or table, so you don’t have to rummage through your papers looking for it every time you need it.
4. **Mark in different places!** Mark at work, at home, and anywhere else that’s not public. This means of course carrying a laptop or scripts around as well as your marking scheme (or a copy of it). It does, however, avoid any one place becoming so associated with doom and depression that you develop place-avoidance strategies for it!
5. **Mark one question at a time through all the scripts, at first.** This allows you to become quickly skilled at marking that question, without the agenda of all the rest of the questions on your mind. It also helps ensure reliability and objectivity of marking. When you’ve completely mastered your marking scheme for all questions, it’s fine to start marking whole scripts.

**Extract from Sally Brown on feedback**

(From ‘Learning, teaching and assessment: global perspectives’, 2015, Palgrave-Macmillan)

**What students really hate about feedback is**:

* Poorly written comments that are nigh on impossible to decode, especially when impenetrable acronyms or abbreviations are used, or where handwriting is in an unfamiliar alphabet and is illegible;
* Cursory and derogatory remarks that leave them feeling demoralised ‘Weak argument’, ‘Shoddy work’, ‘Hopeless’, ‘Under-developed’, and so on;
* Value judgments on them as people rather than on the work in hand;
* Vague comments which give few hints on how to improve or remediate errors; ‘OK as far as it goes’, ‘Needs greater depth of argument’, ‘Inappropriate methodology used’, ‘Not written at the right level’;
* Feedback that arrives so late that there are no opportunities to put into practice any guidance suggested in time for the submission of the next assignment.

**Therefore good feedback:**

* Is dialogic, rather than mono-directional, giving students chances to respond to comments from their markers and seek clarification where necessary.
* Helps clarify what good work looks like, so students are really clear about goals, criteria and expected standards, and provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance (Sadler, 2010, *op cit*);
* Actively facilitates students reviewing their own work and reflecting on it, so that they become good judges of the quality of their own work;
* Doesn’t just correct errors and indicate problems, potentially leaving students discouraged and demotivated, but also highlights good work and encourages them to believe they can improve and succeed;
* Delivers high quality information to students about their achievements to date and how they can improve their future work. Where there are errors, students should be able to see what needs to be done to remediate them, and where they are undershooting in terms of achievement, they should be able to perceive how to make their work even better;
* Offers ‘feed-forward’ aiming to ‘increase the value of feedback to the students by focusing comments not only on the past and present…but also on the future – what the student might aim to do, or do differently in the next assignment or assessment if they are to continue to do well or to do better’ (Hounsell, 2008, p. 5).
* Ensures that the mark isn’t the only thing that students take note of when work is returned, but that they are encouraged to read and use the advice given in feedback and apply it to future assignments.