**Feedback extracts**

# 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.