# Phil Race: tips on feedback for staff and students

# [From ‘Making Learning Happen: 3rd edition’ (2014) and ‘The Lecturer’s Toolkit: 4th edition’ (2015)]

# Using feedback to make learning happen: 20 ways forward for tutors (From ‘Making Learning Happen)

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.

**Reducing your load: short cuts to good feedback (From ‘The Lecturer’s Toolkit)**

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.

**Tips for Students: Making the most of your feedback (from ‘Making Learning Happen)**

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.