Helping students take control of their own learning


According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, “good feedback practice is...anything that might strengthen the students’ capacity to self-regulate their own performance” (p205).

Based on a synthesis of the research literature, they argue that good feedback does seven things.

**Good feedback practice:**

1. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)

This means creating understanding of the goals, criteria and expected standards. Possible clarification strategies include:

- providing exemplars;
- providing better definitions of requirements, criteria and descriptions of performance levels;
- more discussion and reflection on criteria and standards with students before assignments are started;
- students marking or commenting on each other’s work in relation to defined criteria and standards;
- students and teacher collaboratively devising/negotiating assessment criteria for a particular piece of work.
2. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning

Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick assume that a major goal of education is to help students learn to monitor their own performance (i.e. recognise gaps between task goals and how well they are doing). Students will do this by engaging purposefully with the learning tasks. Structured tasks can, in the long run, help students gain this independence and ability to self-assess. Students need to be engaged deliberately in two things in relation to their own performance:

- identifying and understanding the standards and/or criteria that will apply to their work (as in Principle 1);
- making judgements about how their work measures up against or relates to the standards.

Teachers can use various strategies to promote students’ self-assessment, such as adding a suitable question to essay cover sheets which asks students to, for example, identify strengths and weaknesses, request feedback on specific aspects of their work which they are concerned about, and/or identify how their work takes into account feedback received in previous weeks.

3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning

Students can use tutor comments to evaluate their progress and check whether their own “internal constructions of goals, criteria and standards” are correct, in effect providing a check on their own self-assessments. The identification of ‘quality’ in feedback has been identified in the literature as depending on the extent to which it relates to student needs and the goals set by teachers. As such it must:

- relate to the pre-defined criteria;
- be delivered to the student in time for them to respond to its advice in the next assignment;
- offer corrective advice, not just analysis of strengths and weaknesses;
- if necessary, be limited to the amount of feedback that you can expect the student to act on;
- direct students towards the higher level learning goals;
- offer praise alongside constructive criticism.

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick stress, however, a focus on developing students’ self-regulation through feedback:

*Good quality external feedback [must consist of] information that helps students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct: that is it [must] help students take action to reduce the discrepancy between their intentions and the resulting effects.*
4. Encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning

If you are teaching in tutorials or other small groups you are ideally placed to put this principle into effect. Dialogue is essential because it enables student and tutor to assure themselves that they understand each other. In particular it enables the tutor to make sure a student’s understanding of feedback is correct. A frequently given example is where the tutor says, “this essay is not sufficiently analytical” but the student does not know how to make the essay more analytical or he or she has misunderstood the concept of ‘analysis’. Asking students at the end of a tutorial to summarise the feedback they have received or to describe what they are going to do differently next time is a simple way of ensuring that tutor feedback has been understood.

Involvement of peers adds another dimension to discussions – in effect another source of external feedback for students. Student peers can often:

- explain things to each other in accessible language;
- provide alternative perspectives on problems, and alternative tactics and strategies;
- comment on each other’s work thereby developing ‘detachment of judgement’ which can be transferred to assessment of their own work;
- motivate each other to be persistent learners.

5. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

As a tutor you have the ability to influence your student’s motivation and self-esteem either positively or negatively. Marking can be negative because it often leads students to compare themselves with others rather than focusing on the task and personal improvement. Researchers have found that praise directed at a student’s ability, intelligence or self-esteem did not lead to the higher levels of achievement. Instead, praising effort and strategic behaviours, or using feedback to focus on learning goals is a very effective form of teaching. Focus on personal qualities can affect attitudes and performance negatively, especially when a student sees the level of attainment he/she has reached as being a reflection of a fixed level of ability. Tutors need to encourage students to believe that attainment can be increased with effort and that difficulties experienced are obstacles they are capable of overcoming.

In terms of teaching practice they [studies on motivation and self-esteem] suggest that motivation and self-esteem are more likely to be enhanced when a course has many low-stakes assessment tasks, with feedback geared to providing information about progress and achievement, rather than high-stakes summative assessment tasks where information is only about success or failure, or about how students compare with their peers (e.g. grades).

This description seems to reflect very strongly the usual practice in tutorials at Oxford.
6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance

Helping students to “close the performance gap” means supporting students while engaged in producing a piece of work but also providing opportunities to repeat the task performance – external feedback cycle, which Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick suggest can be done by allowing resubmission and providing further feedback on the revised task. Recognising, however, the difficulty of providing feedback to students at the most helpful points, they suggest the following strategies:

- provide feedback on work in progress and increase opportunities for resubmission;
- introduce some two-stage assignments where feedback on stage one helps improve stage two;
- model performance gap closing strategies in class (e.g. model how to structure an essay when given a new question);
- provide specific ‘action points’ alongside your normal feedback;
- involve students in identifying the ‘action points’ for themselves in class, after they have read their feedback.

7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching

This point stresses the fact that teachers, too, need to use evidence to improve their teaching. Observing students’ performances carefully provides insight about where students have difficulties, enabling teachers to reconsider their approach to those skills or concepts and focus teaching activities specifically on students’ trouble spots, misconceptions or weaknesses. Thus, good quality teaching that is particularly attentive to student performance enhances both the understanding of students and teachers. Some strategies for generating good quality information about student learning include:

- Using the one-minute paper in lectures or classes to find out what students thought was the most important thing they learned and what was most difficult to understand (see the Learning Institute’s Evaluating your teaching page – http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/support/teaching/resources/evaluate);
- asking students to request the specific feedback they would like when they submit their assignments;
- having students identify areas of difficulty they experienced when they submit their work for feedback;
- asking students in groups to identify “a question worth asking” based on prior study, which they would like to explore for a short time at the beginning of the next tutorial.