

## Informal Feedback: Feedback via Participation

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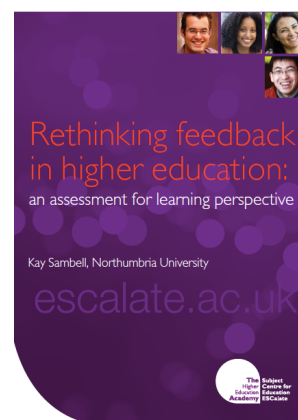
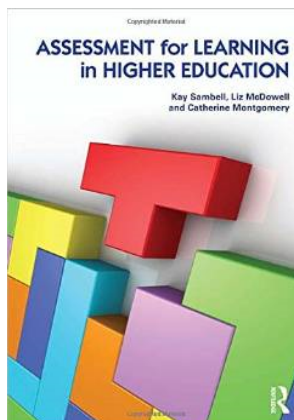
*This Briefing has been written by Professor Kay Sambell at the invitation of the HKU Wise Assessment Project. Its theme, capitalising on opportunities for informal feedback to enhance learning, has been explored by Professor Sambell in a number of publications, including the ESCalate handbook Rethinking Feedback in 2011<sup>1</sup> and most recently, the Routledge book Assessment for Learning in Higher Education<sup>2</sup>.*

*In those publications, creating a course environment that is rich in informal feedback is one of six central principles of effective assessment for learning. The other five are authentic assessment; balancing formative and summative assessment; creating opportunities for practice and rehearsal, designing formal feedback to improve learning; and developing students as self-assessors and effective lifelong learners.*

### Introduction

Students can learn a considerable amount from informal feedback which they derive from active and ongoing participation in everyday tasks and activities as they study their courses. Informal feedback can emanate from a range of sources and methods and does not depend solely on conventional lecturer-to-student feedback. It thrives, for example, in lecture halls and classrooms where teaching and learning methods engage students and teachers in meaningful and interactive discussions, tasks and activities.

An environment that is rich with informal feedback can also be developed by participatory approaches where students learn in collaboration with others (see for instance case examples one and two). In this context, feedback comes from hearing what fellow students say and think and seeing how they approach tasks, and at the same time gauging the response to their own ideas and proposals.



1 Sambell, K. (2011) *Rethinking Feedback: an Assessment for Learning Perspective*. Bristol: ESCalate, Higher Education Academy, Education Subject Centre. Available to download at <http://escalate.ac.uk/8410>

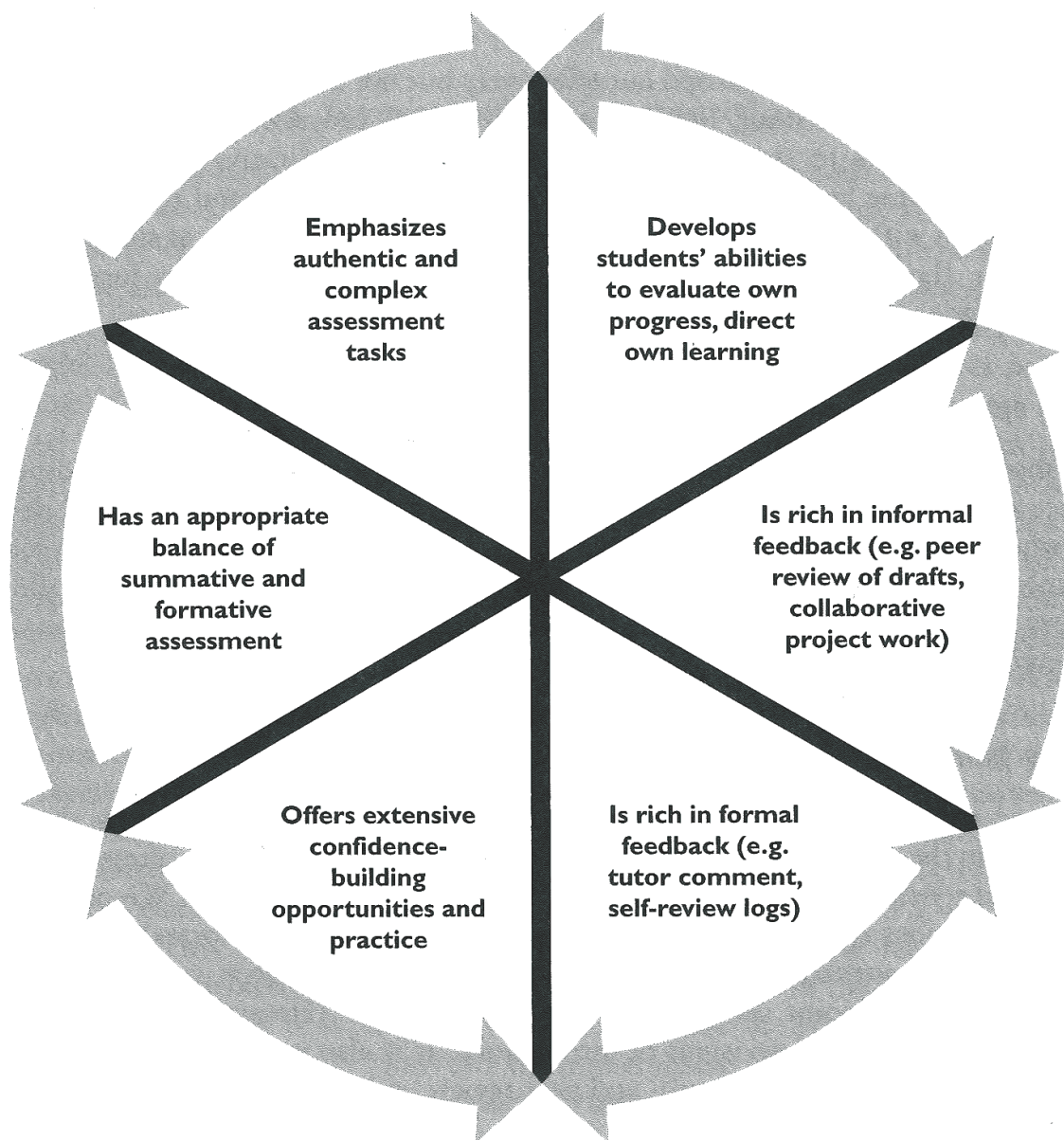
2 Sambell, K., McDowell, L. and Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. London & New York: Routledge. See especially chapter 5, 'Designing opportunities for informal feedback.'

Most of this feedback can ‘simply happen’ if the learning environment is set up appropriately. Yet to many people who strongly associate feedback with teacher comments in relation to formal assessment events, this may not seem like feedback at all. They see it as just part and parcel of good teaching. This, however, is a fairly good place to start, because it implicitly acknowledges the formative potential of the classroom environments which skilled teachers create. In fact, it resonates quite strongly with the wider repertoire of feedback practices which are encapsulated by the Assessment for Learning movement in schools and other settings, but which have been much less prominent in

universities’ attempts to improve the student experience of feedback. From this perspective, the teacher’s pedagogical knowledge (i.e. their accumulated expertise in the day-to-day teaching, learning and assessment of their subject), is regarded as being of paramount importance. It underpins the capacity to create good learning experiences and to skilfully sustain effective classroom discourse.

### Dialogue and intrinsic feedback

Researchers and practitioners who are interested in this kind of approach to feedback often refer to the work of Diana Laurillard<sup>4</sup> and the



Assessment for Learning

3 See for example Black, P. & William, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5.1, pp 7–71.

4 Laurillard, D. (2002). Rethinking University Teaching. *A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*. 2nd ed., London: RoutledgeFalmer.

5 see, for instance, Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35.5, pp. 501-517

conversational model of pedagogy<sup>5</sup>, which is built on a process of interaction or dialogue between students and teachers. Importantly, Laurillard identifies a kind of feedback which she calls *intrinsic* feedback. This is an embedded and unavoidable outcome of acting in the physical and social world, so it emanates quite naturally from the opportunity to interact with materials and contact with other people, almost like a by-product. Here, for example, students may learn from engaging in a carefully designed simulation exercise which enables them to realise if their ideas 'work out' or not. Similarly, students learn to notice how things are done in specific social settings on the basis of the guidance which flows from seeing what other people do and hearing what other people think.

Many practical classes are feedback-rich in this way. In laboratories, for instance, students frequently work on tasks in small groups and interact with other groups - especially where everyone is working on the same task and they want to compare results or have 'got stuck' and want to know how others are doing. But even a large lecture theatre can, with careful planning, become more feedback-rich with the use of personal response systems which allow students to register their answers to questions and view graphs displaying the overall responses of their classmates (as for instance in *case examples two* and *three*). This can form the basis of discussion and comparison amongst peers.

*Case examples five* and *six* show how, in large-class teaching, similarly rich interchange between students and with the teacher can be fostered, whether through collaborative summaries of required reading or via interactive discussions of project work.

## Informal intrinsic feedback

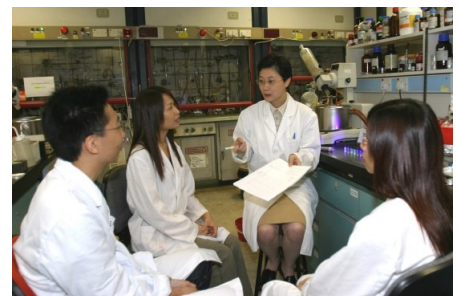
Laurillard also identifies *extrinsic* feedback, which comes in the form of a commentary on action or on a display of understanding. These informal discussions may complement the intrinsic feedback derived from being part of a social context. They might take the form of giving further guidance about the task, as well as comments which help students pinpoint what is currently wrong or appreciate more clearly what might be done to move forwards (see especially *case example six*).

Teacher dialogue is important here, in addition to peer dialogue, because subject-experts with a secure understanding of the cognitive domain are best placed to know what questions to ask students, what to look out for in their responses, and what inferences to draw from errors being made, and what actions to take to address any misconceptions or gaps in understanding<sup>6</sup>.

## Short-cycle classroom feedback

Students find feedback in the classroom a very useful indication of how they are doing and whether they are moving along 'the right lines'. It is short-cycle feedback, specific and contextualized, which complements more formal tutor written feedback. This kind of feedback is better at communicating tacit understandings and requirements which are difficult to explain through more formal written feedback but are generally absorbed through participation and interaction with others.

Informal feedback raises awareness of how subject matter can be seen differently and increases the range of ideas available to each individual. It helps in the less tangible aspects of learning such as the purpose, nature and



importance of the subject area and ways in which individuals can engage with it, building current and future identities, and helping students learn to think and practise, say, like an historian, a scientist or an engineer<sup>7</sup>.

## FURTHER READING

Boud, D. & Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking models of feedback for learning: the challenge of design. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38.6, pp. 698-712

Carless, D., Salter, S., Yang, M. & Lam, J. (2011) Developing sustainable feedback practices, *Studies in Higher Education*, 36:4, 395-407

Hendry, G Integrating feedback with classroom teaching. In Merry, S., Price, M., Carless, D. and Taras, M. (eds) *Reconceptualising Feedback In Higher Education: Developing dialogue with students*, 133-141

McArthur, J. and Huxham, M. 'Feedback unbound: from master to usher.' In Merry, S., Price, M., Carless, D. and Taras, M. (eds) *Reconceptualising Feedback In Higher Education: Developing dialogue with students*, 92-102.

Sambell, K. (2010) Enquiry-Based Learning and formative assessment environments: student perspectives. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 4 (1): 52-61. Available at : <http://194.81.189.19/ojs/index.php/prhe/article/view/34>

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<sup>7</sup> Hounsell, D. and Anderson, C. (2008). 'Ways of thinking and practicing in biology and history. Disciplinary aspects of teaching and learning environments.' in : Kreber, C., ed. *The University and Its Disciplines: Teaching and Learning within and beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*. New York & London: Routledge. pp. 71-83