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WISE ASSESSMENT BRIEFING NO. 10

Feedback as Dialogue

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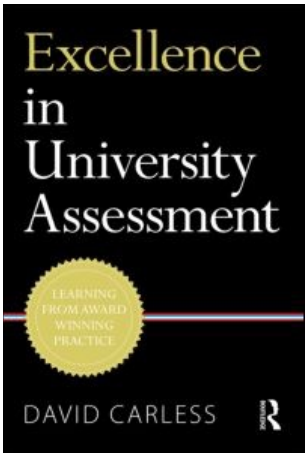
Introduction

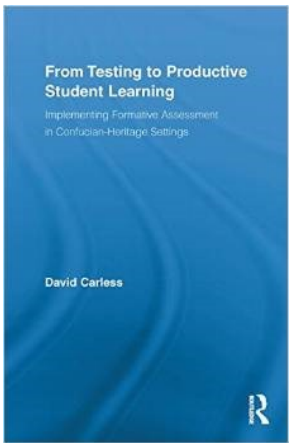


Effective feedback is a critical factor in stimulating learners to improve their understanding and performance. The time and resources available for the development of effective feedback processes are, however, often limited. This suggests that we need new and different ways of thinking about feedback. One of these possibilities is to view feedback more as a means of dialogue rather than just transmission of hopefully useful information.

This briefing is based on a Teaching Development Grant which explored through interviews the feedback practices of HKU teachers who had received awards for teaching excellence[1]; a University Grants Committee GRF (General Research Fund) project which involved detailed classroom observations and related interviews with excellent teachers and their students[2]; and the integration of insights from relevant literature[3].

Dialogic feedback and the student role

A key idea in dialogic feedback is to reduce the burden on teachers and to make students more active in generating and using feedback. Within this theme, there are three main strategies: peer feedback; student self-evaluation; and technology-enhanced feedback.



Students gain a lot from examining their peers' work, identifying strengths and weaknesses and how they can be improved. Such processes begin to sensitize students to what good performance looks like and differences between their work and that of others. Students often resist peer assessment using marks because they do not feel comfortable awarding grades to their friends and classmates[4]. This is why peer review or peer feedback is usually more effective than peer assessment. An important finding is that giving peer feedback is often more productive than receiving it[5], because analyzing someone else's work is more cognitively engaging than receiving comments from a classmate. Justifying and negotiating feedback messages can also enable students to give more careful consideration to criteria and standards.

1 Carless, D., Salter, D., Yang, M. & Lam, J. (2011). Developing sustainable feedback practices. *Studies in Higher Educ*, 36.4, pp. 395-407.
2 Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from Award-Winning Practice*. London: Routledge.
3 Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Educ*, 35.5, pp. 501-517.
4 Liu, N.-F. & Carless, D. (2006). Peer feedback: the learning element of peer assessment. *Teaching in Higher Educ*, 11.3, pp. 279-290
5 Nicol, D., Thomson, A. & Breslin, C. (2014). Rethinking feedback practices in higher education: A peer review perspective. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(1), 102-122.

The main purpose of feedback should be to help students self-evaluate their own work more effectively. All students self-monitor their work to some extent or other, but many students do not do so effectively[6]. This can be frustrating for them when they make changes to a draft which ends up making things worse. Students refine their ability to self-evaluate their performance when they are involved in activities which support them in developing better understandings of what good work looks like; how it differs from their attempts; and strategies to close the gap between the two.

Technology has considerable potential to promote feedback dialogues. Learning management systems such as Moodle enable students to involve themselves in dialogues around module content or work-in-progress. Moodle discussion is generally more motivating for students when participation grades are included, for example, through assessed online quizzes[7]. Student responses which enable teachers to understand learning progress are also particularly useful. Clickers or electronic voting systems are a useful way of collecting students' views on a problem or issue[8]. The instant feedback aspect of clickers is generally viewed as attractive and motivating. Audio feedback, whereby teachers record verbal commentary on student work and then send the file to them electronically, is also attracting a number of enthusiasts. Some teachers find it convenient and time-saving whereas others find it takes some time to get used to a different way of doing things[9].

The role of the teacher in feedback dialogues

Conventional feedback which occurs after completion of assignments is rather a blunt tool because it is too late to act, so there is no opportunity or incentive to close the feedback loop.

A useful teaching strategy is to modify the timing of guidance and feedback processes. Students appreciate integrated cycles of guidance and feedback within module time[10]. They value guidelines about what is expected and how they might tackle assignments. Even more useful from the student perspective are samples of student work: exemplars of performance from previous or parallel cohorts. Exemplars are concrete manifestations of quality[11]. The dialogic analysis of such samples can play an important role in students developing an appreciation of the nature of quality work. Guidance can also take the form of pre-emptive hints based on teacher understanding of common problems students experience in the assignments they are undertaking.

The way sequences of assessment tasks are designed is an important facilitating or inhibiting factor for dialogic feedback. When there is a cumulative series of tasks in a module, there is greater potential for feedback from one task to inform the next. With these kinds of assessment designs, students engage more actively with feedback messages because they can use them when it counts towards their performance in a module assessment. Conversely, a one-off examination or end-of-semester essay may represent a convenient and workload-friendly assessment design, but it is unlikely to promote productive feedback processes.

Even within conventional marking of student written work, it is feasible to engineer some dialogue. On the cover page of their assignments, students can be asked to state those aspects on which they would most like to receive feedback[12]. This prompts them to think about their work and starts to develop some partnership in assessment and marking. It may also save the marker time as they can focus their comments more on the issues identified by students. Feedback is sometimes based too much on what the teacher wants to say, rather than on students' needs and interests[13].

Addressing challenges for dialogic feedback

Feedback as dialogue is best implemented through thoughtful, skilful and student-centred teaching. This is often not easy in view of the multiple demands of the academic life and the imperative to produce research outputs. The mindful teacher may like to involve students in communication and negotiation around assessment and feedback processes. Students are often curious about how their work is marked, the interplay between the published criteria or rubrics and the more personal judgments of the teacher, and the meaning of feedback and its implications.

An obvious challenge for teaching, learning, assessment and feedback is that of large class sizes, which can impede the development of care and trust

6 Nicol, D. (2007). Laying a foundation for lifelong learning: Case studies of e-assessment in large 1st-year classes. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(4), 668-678.
7 See also Wise Assessment Briefing no. 2, *Assessing In-Class Participation*
8 See e.g. Wieman, C. et al. *Clicker Resource Guide. An Instructors Guide to the Effective Use of Personal Response Systems (Clickers) in Teaching*. University of Colorado/University of British Columbia. http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/clickers.htm
9 See e.g. King, D. et al. (2008). Does it make a difference? Replacing text with audio feedback. *Practice & Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 3.2, pp. 145-163
10 Hounsell, D. et al (2008). 'The quality of guidance and feedback to students'. *Higher Educ Research & Developm*, 27.1, pp. 55-67
11 Sadler, D. R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 535-550.
12 Nicol (2010). See footnote 3
13 Carless, D. (2013). Sustainable feedback and the development of student self-evaluative capacities. In S. Merry, S. et al (eds.). *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: Developing Dialogue with Students* London: Routledge. pp.113-122.

Feedback as Dialogue

CASE EXAMPLES FROM HKU

Post-exam dialogue in Law

After an examination, Rick Glofcheski invites Law students to stay behind and engage in immediate dialogue around the issues raised by the exam questions. In this way, students receive feedback immediately while the topics are fresh. They are also involved in articulating the rationale for their arguments and receiving prompt feedback. Importantly, if students produce a novel convincing argument, this may be added to the marking scheme which brings an element of student participation into the assessment and feedback process.

In-class dialogues in Business

In his Business courses, Ali Farhoomand stimulates extended in-class dialogues both on content issues and in relation to the development of student capacities in learning how to learn. In one learning activity, students do presentations of an original business idea. Ali videos the presentations, replays a short extract and then invites the presenter to reflect on their performance. A reflective discussion among the group then ensues. In this way, students are involved in dialogic feedback using self-evaluation and peer feedback moderated by teacher commentary.

Feedback on a draft project plan in Geology

In his course on Principles of Geology, Lung-Sang Chan requires students to carry out a group project on a novel problem related to Geology. Students submit a short draft plan for their project and receive prompt, brief feedback. Teacher experience has shown that students do not always focus correctly on a novel problem. For students who start on the wrong track, the teacher feedback rectifies missteps at this early stage. In this way, students are receiving timely and usable feedback which informs their ongoing planning.

Questioning and dialogue in Architecture

Through critical reviews in Architecture, John Lin takes on the role of coach and critic in commenting on design work in progress. When he is a critic, he is involving students in questioning and dialogue focused on developing a sense of quality in architectural design and honing their self-evaluative capacities. The skilful proponent of dialogic feedback often has to resist being too directive in feedback, and seek to support students in working out ways forward for themselves.

Dialogue via social media in History

In his Common Core Course on Making History, David Pomfret sets up a Facebook page for the group. A number of students post their work in progress on Facebook and interact around the issues arising. Social media, attractive to students, is being used to promote dialogue and incubate debate. David's willingness to engage with students and his promptness in replying to queries are much appreciated by students.

that often imbue productive feedback processes. An emphasis in this Briefing has been on peer review, student self-evaluation and technology-enhanced feedback as practical tools which have potential to minimize (if not fully overcome) the challenges of class size.

There is sometimes student resistance to receiving comments from peers because they worry they are not sufficiently authoritative. This is a valid point. An important counter-argument is that the processes of peer review go beyond the usefulness of a specific individual point. Peer review opens our horizons to different ways of doing things and enables us to compare our approach to that of others. It can remind us what we are doing well and also sensitize us to key areas of improvement.

Do students have the will to invest themselves in peer review, self-evaluation and technology-enhanced feedback? The best teachers set high expectations for students, motivate them and encourage them. We need to have faith in students wanting to improve and being willing to generate and use feedback for their own improvement.

Taking stock

We conclude the briefing by posing a number of key questions.

Feedback as dialogue: Key questions
1. How can we engage more productively with students on the purposes, processes and challenges of feedback? How can we best encourage students to take a more active role in generating, analyzing and acting on feedback?
2. How can we convince students of the value of peer review in sensitizing them to the nature of quality work in the discipline?
3. How can we support students in developing their ongoing capacities to self-monitor their own work in progress?
4. What are the most productive ways of using technology in the service of promoting effective feedback processes?
5. How might time on marking be used more efficiently to impact on students? Might more time be spent on early assignments in a module and correspondingly less on final assignments?