Key points

In order to best support student learning it is important that feedback is understood as an on-going dialogue rather than a series of responses to disparate pieces of work. Some key reasons for the importance of dialogue are as follows:

- Dialogue can support student engagement with and understanding of feedback.
- Dialogue can foster students’ sense of academic connectedness across assessments and topic areas.

You might also be interested in

- Engaging students in the use of feedback
- Peer feedback
- Intrinsic feedback
- Feedback turnaround time

M. Miller (2006) tentatively concluded from an FDTL project at Oxford Brookes that, 'to secure engagement with feedback it may help to develop strategies which support interaction, mimicking the positive dialogue students seem to want'. In other words feedback should be viewed as a ‘continuous dialogue within a cyclical assessment process’ (Beaumont et al 2011, p. 684), rather than a series of isolated events. Such dialogue may be verbal or written or a combination. Beaumont, O’Doherty and Shannon produced a model of a dialogic feedback cycle which can be used to plan feedback within the curriculum. The model covers preparatory guidance, in-task guidance and performance feedback (Beaumont et al 2011, p. 675).

Beaumont et al. reported that the students in their study viewed feedback which included opportunities for discussion as quality feedback, that is, ‘a system of guidance that provides not only a summative judgement of performance, but support through opportunities for a discussion which identifies areas of improvement and scaffolds the student to help achieve higher grades’ (Beaumont et al 2011, p. 674).

Carless et al. (2011, p. 397) put forward a case for adopting dialogic feedback practices which treat feedback as a dialogical process not just as the transmission of information, ‘dialogic feedback suggests an interactive exchange in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified’. The capacity of tutors to be able to instigate such dialogue will of course be somewhat dependent on having an appropriate staff/student ratio. Similarly, one strategy reported at UCLan to encourage students to engage with their feedback rather than concentrate on marks required students to make a one-to-one appointment with their module tutor to collect their assessments. During the meeting students are asked how they found the assignment and what mark they believe they have obtained based on the marking criteria. After the student has reflected the tutor goes through the assessment with the student and highlights areas for improvements; students are expected to go away with at least 2 or 3 points to improve on (Delli-Colli, n.d., p. 7).
Hughes questions the value of the often disjointed nature of feedback given in criteria-based assessment regimes, ‘dialogue about single pieces of work is valuable but the benefits might be lessened if there is little opportunity for dialogue to continue over a period of time’ (Hughes 2011, p. 360). He argues that it is necessary to distinguish between generic and task-specific feedback and makes a case for using ipsative feedback i.e. feedback which, ‘is based on a comparison with the learner’s previous performance and linked to long-term progress’ (Hughes 2011, p. 353). Hughes argues that facilitating feedback which focuses on the progress of individual learners rather than achievement of criteria means that feedback can support the development of critical generic skills with long term value rather than focussing on short-term achievement of assessment criteria. He argues that such feedback will be more meaningful to students and students are therefore more likely to respect and engage with the feedback provided. Ipsative assessment relates to the type of self-assessment by students encouraged in Personal Development Planning. Within the NTU context of a criteria-based marking system it would not be possible to fully implement an ipsative feedback approach. However, elements of the approach could be used to complement formative feedback with the aim of encouraging more meaningful, focused individual study. Ipsative feedback can be exchanged implicitly through group discussion with peers and experts. The creation of situations in which students can discuss their work is important then for individual and collective meaning-making, ‘listening to how others – staff and students alike – express the sense they make of a topic, helps novices realise when they do not understand the ideas that emerge from a discussion or shared activity’ (Sambell 2011). In the same way discussion of work can help to develop critical thinking by fostering student understanding of knowledge as contestable.

In some contexts such as large cohort groups there may necessarily be greater reliance on written rather than in-person feedback and this may hinder dialogue. Nicol (2010, p. 512) provides a dialogical context for written feedback which suggests that written feedback comments should be:

- Understandable: expressed in a language that students will understand
- Selective: commenting in reasonable detail on two or three things that the student can do something about
- Specific: pointing to instances in the student’s submission where the feedback applies
- Timely: provided in time to improve the next assignment
- Contextualised: framed with reference to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria
- Non-judgmental: descriptive rather than evaluative, focused on learning goals not just performance goals
- Balanced: pointing out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement
- Forward looking: suggesting how students might improve subsequent assignments
- Transferable: focused on processes, skills and self-regulatory processes not just on knowledge content
- Personal: referring to what is already known about the student and her or his previous work
A resource which may be useful arose from a Kings College London seminar specifically relating to feedback as dialogue. Entitled 'Closing the Loop: Conceptualising feedback as dialogue to share evidence-based practice in formative assessment'. Online resources from the conference are available on the Higher Education Academy website.

**References**


DELLI-COLLI, S., no date. *UCLan Good Practice Guide to Feedback*. Accessed online 27 December 2012 (not available 7.7.15)


