Types of Feedback – advantages and disadvantages

The following is a list of types of feedback, outlining advantages and disadvantages of each method. Adapted from article by Phil Race in Higher Education Authority “Using feedback to help students learn”

1. Feedback in writing or print

This section is about hard-copy feedback, whether written directly onto students’ assessed work, or supplied in writing or print alongside returned work. A clear advantage of hard-copy feedback is that it is enduring, and can be viewed and reviewed again by students. However, a clear disadvantage with hard-copy feedback is that it is enduring! A batch of feedback comments to different students can endure quite long enough for each and every inconsistency we make to be used against us in evidence.

- 1A: Handwritten comments on (or about) students assessed work
- 1B: Word-processed overall comments on each student’s assessed work
- 1C: Model answers or solutions, issued to students along with marked work
- 1D: Assignment return sheets
- 1E: Word-processed overall class reports on an assignment
- 1F: Codes written on students’ work, debriefed in a whole-group session

2: Face-to-face feedback

Face-to-face feedback can carry with it very high learning payoff for students. It can be memorable, and can help students to change attitudes and approaches. Face-to-face feedback (whether to individuals or groups) carries with it the additional explanation that comes through body language, facial expression, tone of voice, emphasis, and so on. Furthermore, in face-to-face feedback situations, you have immediate feedback on how your messages are getting across to students. You can tell a lot about how they are reacting to your feedback from their expressions, body language, and so on. Moreover, you can adjust what you say, how you say it, to respond to your observations of what is happening.

- 2A: Face-to-face feedback to whole classes
- 2B: Face-to-face feedback to individual students
- 2C: Face-to-face feedback to small groups of students

3: Electronic Feedback

The range and variety of the use of electronic feedback is one of the fastest growth areas in higher education today. Increasingly, tutors are finding that electronic feedback not only speeds up the delivery of feedback and aids the effectiveness of reception of feedback, but also assists with generating appropriate evidence for the quality of feedback.

- 3A: Emailed comments on students’ assessed work
- 3B: Using computer conferences for overall comments on batches of students’ work
- 3C: Computer-delivered feedback
1: Feedback in writing or print

1A: Handwritten comments on (or about) students assessed work

One of the most widely used forms of feedback includes written feedback on essays, reports, dissertations, solutions to problems, and so on. It is usually accompanied by an assessment judgment.

Advantages

- Feedback can be personal, individual, and directly related to the particular piece of work.
- Feedback may be regarded as authoritative and credible.
- The feedback can be tailored to justify an accompanying assessment judgment.
- Students can refer to the feedback again and again, and continue to learn from it.
- Such feedback provides useful evidence for external scrutiny (such as QAA Subject Review).

Disadvantages

- Handwritten feedback can be hard to read!
- When critical, handwritten feedback - because of its authoritativeness - can be threatening.
- Slow and time-consuming to write individually and hard to find time when class sizes large.
- Can't refer to your own feedback unless you keep photocopies of work and your comments.
- Tempting to degenerate into shorthand, rather than expressing positive/critical comments.

1B: Word-processed overall comments on each student's assessed work

This is feedback which you compose, then print out, for each student, summarizing your reactions to their work. It may be accompanied by an assessment judgment.

Advantages

- Such feedback can remain individual, personal and authoritative.
- It is easier to include pre-prepared statements, using 'cut and paste'.
- Students can refer to it time and time again.
- It is easier to read.
- You can keep copies (paper or electronic) and refer to it easily again
- It provides useful evidence for external scrutiny.

Disadvantages

- Printed feedback can still be threatening to students when critical.
- It may appear less personal to students than handwritten feedback.
- Not as easy to link each feedback point to exact part of the work you want to address.
- The 'cut and paste' elements may show up too strongly to external reviewers is used widely.
- Not easy to emphasis in word-processed feedback, so that most important messages stand out.
1C: Model answers or solutions, issued to students along with marked work

This category covers a wide range of feedback aids, including model answers, perhaps supported by 'commentary' notes highlighting principal matters arising with students' work as whole, worked solutions to calculations or problems, and so on.

**Advantages**

- Students can use model answers to revisit their own work in self-assessment mode, and can use them as a frame of reference illustrating the standards they are working towards.
- Model answers can save you a lot of time writing individual feedback or explanation to students.
- Can be issued to students who missed or are exempted from an assignment exempted from it.
- Constitute useful evidence of standards/expectations, for students and external reviewers.

**Disadvantages**

- Because model answers or solutions are relatively impersonal, some students will not really engage in comparing their own work to them.
- Students who do the assignment equally well overall, but in different ways, may feel that their individuality is not being valued or recognized.
- Students may assume that model answers represent all that they need to know about the topic.
- Students who missed out an important aspect in their own work may not notice the significance of this, and may still need further feedback about their own strengths and weaknesses.
- If assignment is used again, there may be evidence that model answers are still in circulation!

1D: Assignment return sheets

These are normally pre-prepared forms, where you provide detailed written, word-processed or electronic feedback to students on each of a number of assessment criteria applied to their work.

**Advantages**

- You can plan to address each of the most important or recurring feedback agendas, without having to write out the context, or the relevant criteria, each time.
- Students can compare the feedback they receive with that received by peers on the basis of each separate criterion if they wish.
- You can copy the assignment return sheets and keep them for your own records.
- Much more easily than keeping copies of whole assignments along with your written feedback.
- Essential parts of the feedback agenda are clarified by the assignment return sheets, giving students a frame of reference for what is expected of them in similar assignments in future.
- Elements of the assignment return sheets can be fine-tuned to reflect the intended learning outcomes associated with the assessed work.

**Disadvantages**

- Not all feedback you wish to give to students is relate to the anticipated agendas on sheet.
- Students may question you about the differences in their scores or grades.
- May have to find ways to keep feedback for your own records.
- Any pre-prepared agenda is likely to be found to be inappropriate for at least some of the assignments, for example students who do the assignment very well but in an unanticipated way, or students whose work meets the published agenda but where you feel that they still have not actually understood what they are doing (or suspect that plagiarism has occurred).
1E: Word-processed overall class reports on an assignment

These might be issued to a whole (large) group of students, after their work has been marked, along with (or even in advance of) returning to them their marked work. Ideally, such an overall report can be debriefed in a whole-group session with the students.

Advantages

- Students can look back at the report again and again as necessary.
- Students can learn from the feedback on mistakes or inadequacies of other students’ work, and find out from the report about difficulties which were commonly encountered.
- Can save you from writing repeatedly the same feedback for commonly-occurring mistakes.
- Helps you to reflect in some detail on overall student performance in the particular assignment.

Disadvantages

- Feedback to students is much less personal than other processes, tends to concentrate on common features in the work of cohort, while miss individuality shown by some students.
- Students may think the only important points they need to consider are contained in the report.
- If students submit their work late, you may need to delay issuing the report.

1F: Codes written on students’ work, debriefed in a whole-group session

Instead of writing individual positive or critical comments directly onto students’ work, write only a code (a letter, or a number, or a symbol), and alongside compile your ‘glossary of codes’ on overheads, paper or PowerPoint slides, to use when you debrief the work to the whole group (and to issue as a translation-device, so that students can revisit their work and remind themselves of your feedback.

Advantages

- Can save a significant amount of time and energy when ‘hand-marking’ a set of assignments, as you only need describe common feedback comment once; in glossary, rather than on work.
- When addressing common errors or misunderstandings, you can take more time to adjust your feedback messages to make them really understandable.
- Not always possible to squeeze in comment you wish to make in the space available. It’s usually much easier to insert a code letter, number or symbol. This means that students see exactly where the feedback comment relates to their own work.
- Students get their work back without it being covered with threatening feedback markings.
- In your debriefing with the whole group, you can go through each of the important codes one at a time, meaning that all of the students to whom the message is directed get the translation of their code at the same moment. This point-by-point debriefing focuses students’ attention much more sharply than when general debriefings are given. For example, until you reveal your message, all students with a ‘W’ written once or more on their work will be trying to work out for themselves what that ‘W’ might mean.

Disadvantages

- Harder to remember which students made which misunderstandings or mistakes (unless you photocopy their work with your codes on it, or make a grid recording codes for each student).
- Students may lose the glossary or may have trouble re-translating codes when they review.
- Process of debriefing can be boring for better students who made few errors or misunderstandings.
2: Face-to-face feedback

2A: Face-to-face feedback to whole classes

This includes giving oral feedback to a whole class after having marked their assignments, before or after returning their actual work to them. Alternatively, you can give face-to-face feedback to whole group about the task immediately after collecting their work, but before you've marked it, so that they get at least some feedback on the task as soon as possible, while the task is still fresh in their minds.

**Advantages**

- You can give a lot of feedback to a lot of students in a relatively short time.
- Feedback is strengthened by tone of voice, facial expression, body language, emphasis, etc.
- Students can compare reactions to feedback, especially when you use discussion in process.
- You can support feedback to the whole group by issuing a handout summarizing main points.

**Disadvantages**

- Feedback is less individual, personal and intimate to students.
- Can only concentrate on principal feedback matters, not less-common feedback issues.
- Students' records or memories of your feedback may be inaccurate and sketchy, and they may not remember the detail when later they look back over their assessed work.
- Students may be so busy thinking about one particular aspect of your feedback, which they know will apply to their particular work, that they miss other elements as you talk.

2B: Face-to-face feedback to individual students

Can include one-to-one appointments with students, individual discussions out of class or in practical settings.

**Advantages**

- Feedback is likely to be found to be personal, intimate and authoritative.
- You can address each individual student's needs, strengths and weaknesses.
- It is often much quicker to talk rather than write or type.

**Disadvantages**

- One-to-one face-to-face feedback can be extremely threatening when critical.
- Students may become defensive when receiving critical feedback and you may feel tempted to go in harder to justify the feedback.
- Students can be embarrassed when receiving positive feedback and this can cause them not to fully benefit from praise.
- It takes a great deal of time to organize individual appointments with students in large classes.
- There can be more time wasted between appointments, and with students who don't turn up.
- Students tend to remember only *some* of a feedback interview with an important person like you, often the most critical element, and this may undermine confidence unduly.
- It becomes impossible to remember exactly what you said to whom, when class sizes are large.
2C: Face-to-face feedback to small groups of students

Such feedback is often timetabled into tutorial sessions or in group work where students are working on projects or practical tasks. Some of the advantages of face-to-face feedback can be further exploited, and some of the disadvantages of feeding back to individuals are reduced.

Advantages

- It can be less threatening to students than one-to-one feedback, especially when critical.
- Individuals’ needs can be addressed, while still retaining some relative anonymity within group.
- Students can learn from the detail of feedback to others in the group, avoid the problems which others have encountered, and put their own work into context.
- You can enter into detailed discussion if students in group wish, so matters arising are followed up in more - depth than would have happened with individual one-to-one appointments.

Disadvantages

- Students may not take quite as much notice of feedback to them as members of a group than they would have done to one-to-one feedback.
- Can be hard to include all the feedback matters which are needed by the group as a whole.
- Discussions may get out of perspective, and result in only part of the intended overall feedback agenda being covered by the group session.

3: Electronic feedback

3A: Emailed comments on students’ assessed work

This is most often one-to-one individual feedback on students' work, delivered to them by email. The level can range from simple qualitative overall feedback to very detailed feedback. An example of the latter is when tutors use the ‘tracking changes’ facilities of word-processing packages to return to students their original word-processed assignments, duly edited with feedback comments which appear on-screen in another colour. Suggested changes can be electronically 'accepted' or 'rejected' by students using these facilities and they can produce a post-feedback edition of their work if they wish (or they can be required to do so as part of the overall assessment process).

Advantages

- You can send at any convenient time or place as you're assessing their work.
- You have the opportunity to edit your feedback before you finally send it
- Students can receive when they're ready; usually taking feedback in relative comfort of privacy.
- Can tailor your feedback to individual students’ needs, strengths and weaknesses.
- Students can refer back to your feedback again and again
- Can keep track of what feedback you have given to which students.
- Can use electronic cut and paste, and save typing out frequently-needed messages
- Students can reply directly about your feedback.
- Useful evidence is built up relatively automatically, for external review.

Disadvantages

- Students may have limited access to networked computers, and may be somewhat rushed when they have opportunities to receive your feedback.
- Students may not treat feedback as seriously as if it were face-to-face, printed or handwritten
- Students may not be able to look at your feedback at the same time as their original work
- Students are more likely to 'lose' emailed feedback than printed or handwritten feedback.
3B: Using computer conferences for overall comments on batches of students’ work

Computer conferences provide option for one-to-many electronic communication for feedback messages which have relevance to majority of a group of students, along with the choice to go to one-to-one communication for those parts of feedback messages which are more individual or personal.

Advantages

- Most of advantages of emailed feedback still apply, except the option of responding individually through the conference to each student's strengths and weaknesses. Even this can, of course, be addressed by adding individualized emails to the computer conference communication.
- Your overall feedback response to an assignment can be sent as it stands to each of many students, who can each receive it when and where it is convenient to them.
- You can save time responding to matters affecting many students, and use the time saved to reply separately by email to those students needing more detailed or individual feedback.
- Students can learn from your feedback to other issues than the ones they need to think about.
- Students can reply individually to you about your overall feedback, and (if you structure the conference accordingly) can directly see each other’s responses to your feedback, and generate real conference-type discussion of matters arising from an assignment (and to your own assessment and feedback of the assignment).

Disadvantages

- Students may be less inclined to search through a generalized electronic feedback message for elements which apply to their own work.
- Students replying to the conference about your feedback may feel more exposed than when replying directly to you by email.

3C: Computer-delivered feedback

This broad category includes the use of (pre-prepared) feedback responses to structured self-assessment questions in computer-based learning packages. Computer-based feedback can be programmed into learning packages on floppy disk or CD Rom, and can also be programmed into web-based packages delivered through Intranets or the Internet.

Advantages

- Students can work through computer-based learning materials at their own pace, and within limits at their own choice of time and place.
- Feedback to pre-designed tasks can be received almost instantly by students, at the point of entering their decision or choice into the system.
- Computer-based feedback legitimizes learning by trial and error, and allows students to learn from mistakes in the comfort of privacy.
- You can prepare detailed feedback in anticipation of the most likely mistakes or misconceptions which you know will be common among your students.
- Students can view the feedback as often as they need it as they work through the package.

Disadvantages

- You can't easily tell to what extent individual students are benefiting from your feedback.
- Students who don't understand the feedback responses may not be able to question you in the ways they could have used with emailed or computer-conference-based feedback.
- The 'now you see it, now it's gone' syndrome can affect students' retention of your feedback messages, as students move quickly from one screen of information to another.