

COMMENTING CONSTRUCTIVELY ON ASSESSED WORK

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Students put great store by the comments we put on their work. They often come to university with high expectations about the nature and value of teacher comments, and look to them to provide them with authoritative guidance on their learning and performance. Where that provision is found wanting, unhelpful or unconstructive, students rapidly become disenchanted, disappointed and alienated.

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Concentrating on helping students gain access to helpful, motivational and developmental feedback has been acknowledged as one of the most valuable things institutions can do for their learners (Brown, 2015; QAA, 2017; Sparqs, n.d.). While there is growing emphasis on achieving a broader, more nuanced view of feedback, which extends well beyond the provision of input information (Boud and Molloy, 2013), nevertheless, tutors' commenting practices can have an important part to play in the overall feedback and guidance loop (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008).

Students await tutor comments eagerly (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002), so it's probably sensible to try as far as possible to provide feedback comments to students in ways which are most likely to make a difference to the quality of their learning (Hounsell, n.d.).

1. Consider the tone of our messages

It's important to strive to achieve a tone which is honest, yet respectful, since there is a strong affective and interpersonal dimension to feedback. Feedback that is overly negative may act as a powerful disincentive for student learning, particularly for those students who already have low self-esteem. We need to avoid 'shorthand' and derogatory remarks (such as 'slapdash work', 'under-developed', 'weak argument' and so on) that might leave students feeling discouraged. Hedging tactics ('perhaps you could try to...' 'I wondered if...') can take the sting out of overly-direct criticisms (although watch out for this reducing the force of your suggestions and leading to misunderstandings).

Helpful feedback makes a conscious distinction between the person (who is always valued) and particular outputs/work, so it can be useful to be careful to focus comments on the task and processes which underpin successful achievement, not the individual.

2. Be as clear as possible

From students' viewpoints, many of the comments they receive from academics seem opaque, overly complex and difficult to understand. We must say what we mean and avoid wrapping things up in jargon and fancy words.

To help with this we can provide precise examples of where the particular piece of work seems to have fallen short, or specific suggestions about how the learner might go about remedying it. We can try, for example, to explain, amplify, illustrate and provide examples. It helps if we can enable learners to get enough information to be able to pinpoint the aspects of the work we're referring to – giving concrete examples, if we can.

3. Be realistic

We can focus our comments on things that the recipient is likely to be able to do something about and avoid suggesting things that are likely to be way beyond their scope.

We can attempt to strike a balance between offering too few and too many comments. It's useful to offer more than a few ticks in the margins or a grade, but not to give so many comments as to intimidate or overwhelm. For instance, we might choose three main things to focus on for them to improve. Specific comments based on identifiable, concrete behaviour that can be changed are likely to be more helpful than generalisations.

4. Help students see how they might apply the messages they receive to future work

Rather than limiting our feedback comments to correcting the specific piece of work that has just been undertaken, we can try to link more firmly to next steps and future tasks (Walker, 2009). We can focus on developmental areas to improve. We can also pitch comments at the students' proficiency to reflect, self-assess, act on feedback information, degree of self-confidence in the correctness of their response etc.

We can also help students to: plan to take specific action, so the next assessment, or future task is at the forefront of their minds; locate useful resources, online links (e.g. to skills workshops) or further support materials; seek out assistance or help, if appropriate.

5. Encourage active engagement with your comments

Learning from feedback involves much more than simply receiving information – opportunities for action, change and interaction are also important as part of an overall process. It can be helpful, for instance, to offer students opportunities to discuss comments on their assignments, so they can clarify any misunderstandings and you can see how students are responding to your comments.

Other suggestions include getting students to think in advance of submission about what would best help them, perhaps by requesting the type of feedback they'd value most when they submit an assignment, or taking 10 minutes to undertake a self-evaluation activity just before they hand in an assignment. Asking students to self-assess, then targeting your comments on areas where their judgements differ from your expert evaluations, can be a powerful means of helping students better understand quality and gauge what actions they need to take in future. Students often expect tutor comments to focus on 'telling,' 'correcting' and indicating where they went 'wrong'. The way we construct comments can help with this. For example, try to balance directions (corrections, commands and so on which explicitly point out specific changes to the text) with more facilitative comments framed as questions or suggestions, (observations designed to engage your student with the text). For instance, you could ask 'how does this point connect with your overall thesis?' 'What are the consequences of this way of approaching the issue?'

KEY TAKEAWAYS

If we get it right and make feedback a vehicle for learning, we can make a real difference to students' achievements and morale. Equally, we can damage students' confidence and their willingness to keep trying if they don't perceive what we are saying is useful. Helping them understand that everything we say or write is directed towards enabling them to move forward positively is crucial.

6. Discuss the purpose of your feedback.

It may also be useful explicitly to discuss, in class, the multiple functions of feedback and clarify your purpose, so as to expand their view of what you hope your comments will achieve. For example, you might hope to generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks; to develop understanding via explanations; to highlight inter-connections; to enhance skills; to stimulate reflection and awareness of learning processes; to help students learn to evaluate their own work.

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