



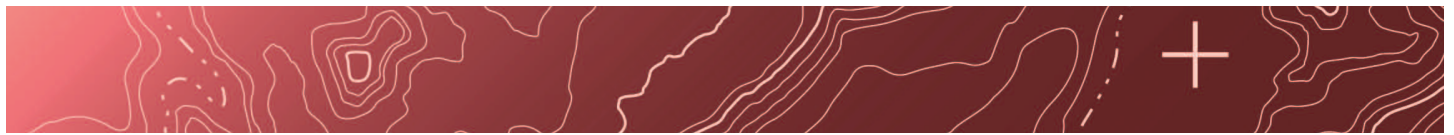
## GEES Briefing 1

# Giving Feedback

### “You’re fired!”

Most of us will admit occasionally to having been fascinated by the television show *The Apprentice*, and will have watched as Lord Sugar pitches into young men and women after their teams have attempted to complete a business challenge. Whatever we may think about Lord Sugar’s style of giving feedback, the obvious advantage of his tough approach is that the feedback is clear, unambiguous and to-the-point. It is delivered direct to the individual in a timely, albeit often painful way. They hear his harsh critique of themselves and their teammates, and they reflect upon the experience afterwards. Robust contestants presumably learn a lot.

We might debate whether this is an appropriate model for apprentice GEES students. Few GEES tutors give feedback in this way because an emotionally charged public scene is not regarded as the best way to enable our students to grow in confidence and understanding. Lord Sugar’s apprentices are pre-screened, ambitious individuals, not the heterogeneous set of people more typical in contemporary HE. Moreover, in most GEES departments, the days of having a handful of students to whom frequent, detailed, individual feedback can be provided, are past. GEES tutors might nevertheless have a sneaking admiration for a system that ensures that feedback is delivered so compellingly, and acted on so speedily by suitably motivated disciples. Conversely, from the students’ point of view, how frustrating is feedback that, despite its restrained and upbeat delivery, is illegible, irrelevant or too late, or that offers them little or no clue on how to improve their performance?



## What is feedback?

Feedback is the information provided to students describing their relative success with a piece of assessed work, or on other aspects of their learning. It can be the words written in the margin of an examination script, the commentary provided after a presentation at the end of a field class, or the tick box grade form used to explain and justify marks awarded for the elements of design and content in a web page. The GEES academic community is notable for the diversity and richness of the assessment strategies it uses, and the modes of feedback can be similarly innovative.

Feedback is the cornerstone of all learning and is key to helping students understand their progress, and to becoming more effective independent learners (Orrell 2006). Effective feedback identifies strengths and weaknesses, provides clear guidance on how future performance can be improved; it encourages, stimulates and empowers the student. It has an emotional as well as an intellectual impact, and it balances comprehensiveness against inspiration. However, meeting this demand is potentially a challenging task for the busy GEES tutor.

## Feedback and Assessment

Just as learning and assessment are intertwined, so are assessment and feedback. It is axiomatic that the assignment brief must include clear guidance about the intended learning outcomes, and the assessment criteria that will be used in marking the work. Feedback needs to be seen as pivotal to the individual student's learning process, not a perfunctory add-on. It allows each student to chart their development towards whatever goal is desired. It is only through socialisation and repeated engagement with feedback that the tacit knowledge of what being a geographer, geologist or environmental scientist is, emerges in the student. Only then can they understand appropriate content, standards and expectations, relate their own performance to these, and improve subsequent activities. Race (2001) calls this state 'conscious competence'. Moreover, for most UK students in a mass HE system, formal feedback on assignments is almost the only personal guidance they receive. We need to understand how we can maximise the value of these individual encounters, and develop in each student a reflective approach to learning, and a strong desire to succeed.

## What do students want?

*"If a student was to hand in work that was handwritten in illegible writing you would think this was a poor effort and you would fail them. Please show us the simple courtesy of writing clearly so that we know you can be bothered."*

Tutors often remark that students disregard feedback and may only look at the mark awarded. Conversely, students usually suggest that they do value feedback that is well constructed (Weaver, 2006; Yorke, 2003), but that much of it is not. Assessment and feedback are the areas of students' learning experiences which are perennially poorly rated by students according to the UK's National Student Survey. Williams and Kane (2008) have explored the National Student Survey assessment scores in more detail, and provided additional guidance on the elements that tend to improve students' scoring. These include introducing standardised feedback forms, submission and return processes; providing feedback in alternative forms; and using one-to-one tutorials for feedback.

## Student Views on Good and Poor Quality Feedback

(adapted from the Higher Education Academy, 2006).

### Student Views on Good Quality Feedback

- Verbal, face-to-face feedback is particularly useful
- Feedback should be detailed and specific
- Comments should be clear and legible
- Constructive feedback is helpful, including advice on how work may be improved
- Advice and encouragement needs to be given on how to use feedback
- Comments on student work (not on a separate sheet) assist them in identifying and understanding what and where they went wrong

### Student Views of Poor Quality Feedback

- Feedback can be too general (e.g. 'good work') and too brief, giving students little idea of what is right and wrong and how to improve
- Vague annotations are unhelpful (e.g. underlining and ringing sections of text without explanation)
- Illegible handwriting
- For exams, often the grade is given without explanation
- Overly negative comments, which can sometimes be derogatory and insulting
- Inconsistencies between tutors as to what makes a good piece of work



## Timeliness and value of feedback

To maximise its value, feedback must be provided in a timely way. Race (2001) suggests that a day or two is best, but for many tutors that will be wildly optimistic given their schedules. Institutions often have a 'Student Charter' which guarantees that work will be marked and returned in a particular period of time; typically a month. In fact, a month is a considerable time for a student to wait for feedback, if it is intended to improve their subsequent performance. In four weeks they may have forgotten the details of the assessment criteria, their views on their own performance, or even the totality of the work. This aspect naturally has to be set alongside the multiple demands upon staff time, but consistent Departmental practice on timeliness is advisable to ensure equity.

## The language of feedback

Research suggests that students only have limited understandings of staff feedback (e.g. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Weaver, 2006) and that this lack of a shared understanding of academic discourse presents difficulties for them in understanding and using their feedback. Orrell (2006) describes much feedback as being codified in the 'expert' language of the relevant academic discipline. At its most basic, students need to be aware of the meaning of generic words common in academic parlance such as 'critique', 'argument' and 'analysis'. Many are not, according to Weaver (2006), Chanock (2000) and Orrell (2006). When the hugely diverse 'expert' academic discourses of post-modernist human geography, or technical earth science are overlain as well, it is clear that tutors will need to pay particular attention to expressing their feedback unambiguously, avoiding specialist language and opaque vocabulary where possible. Conversely there is the risk of a self-defeating downward spiral of incomprehension, repeated failure and loss of confidence – alienating rather than socialising students.

*“The feedback is frank and concise. Credit is given for the effort I made in researching the topic and it also highlights the areas in need of improvement. The comments are objective and supported with additional notes on the script.”*

However, the issues go beyond that. Feedback needs to be seen by students as enabling learning, and not just as the identification of a set of weaknesses or a progress check; it needs to affirm student's work by balancing positive and negative elements. Overly critical tutor feedback can easily be misinterpreted as a destructive commentary on a student's innate ability rather than their effort. Weaver has noted that tutors do tend to comment particularly on weaknesses (2006). This will be particularly damaging for

those students with low self-esteem, but the research also suggests that gender and cultural background are relevant. Whereas the more resilient individuals will see feedback as motivational and something on which they can act to improve their performance, those with more fragile dispositions can become defensive or agitated, and feel unable to face up to it (Yorke, 2003).

## So what should I say?

Yorke (2003), Mutch (2003) and others have argued that feedback should be seen as a collaboration between tutor and student to achieve the best performance. For a new undergraduate, and particularly in the assessment of items such as field notebooks and laboratory reports, many tutors will focus their feedback on encouragement, evaluating accuracy, identifying gaps in understanding and gently challenging misconceptions. At higher levels, the commentary might be more qualitative, concerned with the structure of the argument and the depth of analysis undertaken. The feedback can be more divergent (Yorke, 2003). It might suggest new ways of exploration, and flag up areas where the research community themselves lack knowledge or experience.

*“The feedback is quite negative and does not appear to encourage me to do better.”*

Whilst always relating to the intended learning outcomes of the assessment, and to the set assessment criteria, commentary should include a balance of positive and negative points appropriate to the weightings of different criteria. It should highlight areas handled well (including task-related aspects such as time management), diagnose any problems and misunderstandings, identify parts or areas that could be improved and provide guidance on how to address them. It needs to cover general points, and to address any specific areas for focus and improvement.

*“The provisional mark is low, although you would not think so by reading the module cover sheet.”*

Opinion is divided concerning how to return marks, as opposed to the more general commentary. Some tutors routinely withhold the marks until the student has had an opportunity to read or hear the narrative or to discuss their work with them, on the basis that this will promote more reflection and subsequent improvement. Others ask students to estimate their mark based on the feedback, before revealing it. However such strategies can, potentially, be irritating to students and expensive of staff time.



## Engaging students with the process?

Research suggests that in order to improve feedback significantly, it is necessary to better engage students in the assessment process. This may take a number of forms including:

- Enabling a dialogue to take place between staff and students on assessment.
- Involving students in negotiating assessment criteria.
- Making use of peer and self-assessment techniques.

By discussing assessment and feedback with students (expected standards, assignment goals, marking criteria, the language of assessment and feedback, and how to act on feedback), staff expectations can be clarified and student misunderstandings can be cleared up. Staff-student discussion also benefits tutors by revealing to them the aspects of assessment with which students have most difficulty. Student negotiated marking criteria and peer/self-assessment techniques also require the students to think carefully about assessment aims, marking criteria, standards and feedback as they must consider these aspects when reflecting on their own work or that of others (Race and Brown, 2005).

Theoretically powerful, such iterative approaches require time to be set aside for group discussion at an early stage in the courses and modules. Implementation must be structured and supported, particularly where students (and staff) are new to these techniques (e.g. Dochy et al, 1999, Pitts, 2005). It can also be difficult to implement these approaches successfully in the absence of an overall Departmental feedback strategy; isolated attempts are likely to be met with incomprehension and complaint by students.

Some GEES tutors may feel that this level of debate with students is a step too far, too time-consuming and unmanageable to be feasible. However, most are likely to feel that more modest improvements, focussing on the content and delivery mechanisms of their feedback, are sufficient and reasonable. Although perhaps even the most hardened amongst us are likely to balk at the apparently effective but overtly Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' tactics of 'The Apprentice'.

For advice on various ways in which feedback might be given, please see the companion briefing 'GEES Briefing 2: Modes of Feedback'.

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