



## GEES Briefing 2

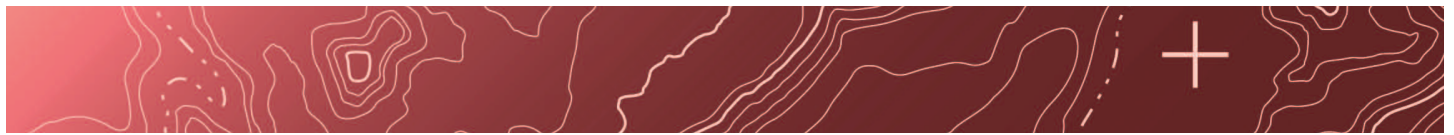
# Modes of Feedback

‘GEES Briefing 1: Giving Feedback’ examined the importance of feedback on student learning. It outlined what constitutes good feedback and summarised what students want from the process. It also looked at factors such as the language of feedback and provided tips on how to engage students in productive debate. In this second companion briefing, ‘GEES Briefing 2: Modes of Feedback’, advice is provided on the various ways in which feedback might be given.

Traditionally feedback is given in a summative written format by the tutor/lecturer and on an individual basis. Typically a cover sheet is used to record the comments, possibly accompanied by some structured tick boxes related to key, generic aspects of the work such as the quality of the written language (spelling, grammar and structure) and the use of relevant literature. Only occasionally does feedback tend to break from this mould. However, there are plenty of other ways of giving feedback which may be more effective in promoting student learning.

This briefing considers some of the options including:

- Giving formative feedback
- Group feedback
- Peer and self-assessment
- Verbal and informal feedback
- Freeform and structured feedback
- Electronic feedback
- Electronic testing with instant feedback



## Formative Feedback

Summative feedback is the judgement on the final outcome of a module or course which certifies the student's performance and to which a mark or grade is attached. Conversely formative feedback is feedback provided to the student at a stage when it can either be used to improve the same piece of work, or to enhance a related later element, usually in the same module or course. It is often informal and is not part of the grading system. We are all familiar with offering summative feedback, but are perhaps less sure of the most effective ways of building formative feedback into our teaching.

### Some ideas on ways to give formative feedback:

- providing guidance to students on their field notebooks mid-way through a fieldtrip
- providing a critique of a first draft of an essay, report or dissertation
- offering a multiple-choice assessment in class to allow students to check their progress;
- an employer providing a view on a work placement portfolio
- using 'clickers' or 'electronic voting systems' (or the low-tech version of coloured cards) that enable students to respond to in-class questions, thus providing an instant indication of how much students have understood
- asking students to evaluate their own work at the point of submission, and to offer a commentary on how well they feel they have addressed the learning outcomes.

## Generic Group Feedback

Giving generic feedback to the whole class, whether this be face-to-face, written or in electronic form (email, VLE, podcast etc) has a number of advantages and disadvantages. It can take the form of the tutor's opinions on the aspects of performance that have been done well and those have been done least well. It can also be based around the use of exemplars of good and bad work. Exemplars are thought to be a particularly effective way of conveying key feedback messages.

### Advantages:

- Generic feedback can be produced more rapidly - marking just a sample of work will unearth the main strengths and weaknesses.
- Providing in-class generic feedback typically enables students to ask questions about the assessment and feedback. VLEs can also be used to encourage group dialogue about their assessment.

- VLEs and other electronic means can be employed to greater effect to give generic feedback after an examination, when other opportunities are not available (because the unit has ended and there are therefore no more scheduled sessions).

### Disadvantages

- Students value and may better 'connect' with individual, personalised feedback
- For students performing at the extreme upper and lower ends of the mark range, generic feedback may be either irrelevant or incomprehensible

A combination of generic feedback and individual feedback where necessary, might be an effective compromise.

## Peer and Self Assessment

Peer critique, an increasingly advocated technique, can help students to sharpen their ideas and develop a better understanding of assessment criteria and the assessment process. It is argued that peer assessment mimics more closely the process of publication for an academic paper, where referees provide feedback to authors, allowing them to develop their work further.

### Tips on peer assessment

- Peer assessment needs to be properly supported (clear guidance, open, non-threatening language), particularly where students may be new to this technique
- Some tutors use 'learning sets', where students share their ideas informally in small groups during the preparation of their assessed work - For GEES students, familiar with group working and the informality of a field class, this will be less radical an experience than for students of some other disciplines
- One of the issues raised by peer assessment strategies is the extent to which the assessed work is then genuinely the student's 'own' work, as opposed to the collective effort of peers. It is therefore important to provide students with clear guidance on expectations

## Verbal and Informal Feedback

Most students will identify the written remarks they receive on their work as 'feedback', and will regard it as suitably authoritative and credible. They may be less accustomed to regarding other sources of guidance as feedback. For instance, discussing a student's work with them after a laboratory class, or showing students previously marked assignments or examination papers may not be recognised as a potentially valuable source of advice.



- To ensure that students understand the various possible channels of feedback, it is helpful to be proactive in highlighting these. This will prepare them to take note of all sources of feedback
- It is particularly important to help students recognise all forms of feedback where there are students with diverse and specific educational needs, for instance international students who may be unfamiliar with the relatively informal relationships typical between most students and tutors in the UK, or dyslexic students who require more time to engage with feedback generally
- It is recognised good practice to offer some one-to-one support and verbal feedback to students who wish to take up the opportunity through 'drop in' sessions or 'office hours' even though this is demanding of time
- The disadvantage of verbal feedback is that typically it leaves no permanent legacy for the tutor, student or external examiner, and may be forgotten or disputed later. Verbal feedback can be recorded to accommodate this, and delivered in ways other than in person (see the section on electronic feedback)

## 'Freeform' or 'structured' feedback?

Most assignments are returned to students with freeform comments. These comments are typically written on cover sheets alongside graded tick boxes on generic aspects of assessment (e.g. on the structure of the assessment).

*"In the final sentence the marker states 'for the most part, easy to read' and 'you might consider adopting a more interesting style of writing to engage the reader'. This is very confusing."*

Based on a detailed survey of GEES students at the University of Gloucestershire, 'freeform' feedback is more popular with students, provided three key requirements are observed.

1. The writing must be legible and comprehensible. Shorthand symbols such as '!' or '?' in the margins may need some explanation too.
2. Feedback must always provide guidance on how to improve the work, even if high marks are being awarded.
3. The feedback must relate clearly to the mark awarded. This is one of the most common criticisms of external examiners – that the tutors' commentary and the mark awarded are not aligned. So, for instance, a tutor may comment that work is 'excellent', but award a mark in the 60s.

*"The handwriting is illegible and reads more like a list of complaints than helpful comment"*

Where it is necessary to correct a large number of serious errors, it is particularly important to word the feedback carefully. An entirely negative paragraph may produce such an intense feeling of failure that the guidance on how to improve the work is lost. Whilst the more robust students will regard the feedback as a productive challenge, some will find it difficult to 'survive' adverse feedback, and may withdraw, feeling that they are a failure.

## Electronic Feedback

Today's technology means that traditional forms of feedback are being strengthened by electronic systems (e.g. France and Ribchester, 2008; Roberts, 2009). For distance learning students this may be the complete experience of assessment. Electronic feedback encompasses a diversity of forms including written, audio/video and e-testing formats.

### Written

- Electronic feedback is rapid - students can access the commentary as soon as the marking has been completed, and without the need to collect paperwork
- Research by Denton *et al* (2008) suggests that students rate electronic feedback as superior to other responses, particularly because of the associated clarity and legibility
- Research also indicates that assessors require less time to mark each item, at least when using specialist software.
- The disadvantage is that the feedback may become dissociated from the work itself, which is particularly annoying if tutors have also added comments directly onto hard copies of a script or object

### Audio / Video Podcasts

- Research suggests that students find podcasting gives very powerful and personal messages about the qualities of their work and recommendations for improvements. This is because verbal feedback has the ability to convey greater nuance in delivery, not apparent in the written word
- With larger classes it is suggested that the time required to assess may be less than for conventional written commentaries
- To get the full benefit, students need to have copies of their piece of work at hand when they listen to the feedback

### e-Testing

- There are various electronic testing systems that can be used which are free standing (e.g. Questionmark Perception) or are available as a function of a VLE. These can be used to pose questions from multiple



choice/ true or false, short answer response, through to essay questions

- E-Testing provides instant feedback
- Recent research on testing feedback suggests that students respond favourably to the greater amount of feedback, and even that their performances may be enhanced beyond those of students receiving similar feedback through more traditional means (Bull and Stephens, 1999)
- There are concerns that such systems can appear impersonal and uniform
- Electronic testing provides the greatest benefits for large student cohorts, where the reduced time required in assessing individual scripts, and the level of feedback received by the students will offset the time taken to develop the answer bank. For smaller classes this may not happen unless the same assessment is used repeatedly for successive cohorts

## Conclusion

Some of the strategies outlined in this briefing for improving feedback to students are simple, and self-contained. Others are more complex and require deeper adjustments to practice and a re-positioning of attitudes to assessment and feedback by both tutors and students. As Orrell (2006) suggests, feedback needs to shift from being seen as postscript to taking a pivotal place in student learning. Those wishing to enhance the quality of feedback, it is hoped that this briefing provides a few ideas of some of the ways forward.

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## Resources

ASke CETL (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange). Oxford Brookes University. 1,2,3 Leaflets. <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources.html>. Includes: Feedback - Make it work for you!; How to make your feedback work in three easy steps!; Using generic feedback effectively; Making peer feedback work in three easy steps!

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