Student engagement with feedback

Feedback is an integral part of assessment and one of the most important factors in student learning. Discussions of feedback in higher education often focus on content (what the feedback says), delivery (how the feedback is given) and timing (when the feedback is given). However, understanding why students do (or don’t) engage with feedback is crucial for developing effective feedback practices.

Improving student engagement with feedback is a key part of building students’ capabilities as critical and independent learners.

Engaging with feedback

While there is a broad consensus amongst students and staff that feedback is central to effective learning, there are still challenges to getting students to engage meaningfully and constructively with feedback. Low uptake of feedback by students is an issue cited by many teaching staff, so it is important to consider the possible barriers to student engagement with feedback.

Research suggests that there are a number of possible barriers to student engagement with feedback:

- Feedback is not useful (e.g. too short; provided too late to be acted upon);
- Feedback is not understood by the student (e.g. uses academic jargon);
- Feedback is not specific or detailed enough;
- Feedback is overly negative;
- Students don’t know what to do with feedback;
- Students’ emotional responses to receiving (and even anticipating) feedback may lead them to avoid feedback altogether.

Encouraging more effective engagement

Here are some tips for encouraging students to engage with feedback more effectively:

- **Be explicit**: Students often equate feedback only with the written comments on a marked assignment. Students may not be aware of the different contexts in which feedback may be given (e.g. during class, in 1:1 consultations or via LMS) so it is important to clearly signpost that you are providing feedback when doing so.

- **Make it actionable**: Provide guidance on specific steps that students can take to act upon the feedback that they receive (e.g. revising a specific topic or lecture; attending a WRITESmart drop-in for academic writing support).

- **Help students see the bigger picture**: Giving, receiving and acting upon feedback is a core employability skill, so emphasise to students how engaging with feedback will help them to develop this professional capability. Students are more likely to take an active role in the feedback process if they can see its relevance beyond their studies.

- **Contextualise it**: Use discipline-specific examples to help students understand how feedback is used in professional contexts (e.g. peer review in academic publishing; market research using focus groups; employee performance evaluations).

- **Encourage students to take an active role**: Effective feedback processes require students and staff to share responsibility and work together. Encouraging students to be active participants in the feedback process (rather than passive recipients of feedback) helps them to understand that feedback is a dialogue rather than a one-way transmission of information (Winstone and Nash, 2016).
• **Assessment design:** Do students in your unit have sufficient time to act upon the feedback provided? Is the feedback relevant to upcoming assessments? Providing more detailed feedback early in the semester will give students more time to act upon it.

• **Consider peer learning:** Designing guided learning activities that encourage students to give and receive feedback to each other can help them to develop feedback skills in a “low-stakes” setting (Carless and Boud, 2018).

• **Acknowledge affect:** Students may find it challenging to receive (or even anticipate receiving) feedback. By acknowledging that this is a typical response to criticism, students can be guided to develop strategies and the resilience to engage with the constructive feedback they receive. Managing affect is crucial to developing student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018).

**References**


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