Developing a Programme Strategy for Feedback on Assessed Work

Rachel Forsyth, Centre for Learning and Teaching

Abstract

Feedback on assessed work is a vital component of our teaching strategies and yet we tend not to articulate it clearly in course planning and documentation. This paper lists the areas that a programme team might need to consider as they produce a feedback strategy and highlights practical issues associated with each one.

Why is Feedback on Assessed Work an Issue?

The National Student Survey is completed annually by final year students across the UK. It asks several questions about assessment and feedback; a sizeable number of final year students at MMU feel that feedback is not provided promptly enough, and that it does not help them to clarify things that they did not understand – see Table 1 National Student Survey (Unistats, 2007).

It is important to put the data into the national context; Table 2 shows that on the average, UK institutions are not meeting the expectations implied by the NSS questions; MMU is not alone in needing to develop in this area.
 Feedback was also mentioned 208

Table 1: Extract from 2006 and 2007 National Student Survey results for MMU (Unistats, 2007)

NSS results for MMU: questions about Feedback ('don't know' responses have been excluded for clarity so percentages do not add up to 100)	2006		2007	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Feedback on my work has been prompt.	46%	36%	51%	30%
I have received detailed comments on my work.	62%	22%	63%	21%
Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	55%	25%	55%	24%

Table 2: Extract from 2006 and 2007 from the average UK National Student Survey results (Unistats, 2007)

NSS results nationally: questions about Feedback ('don't know' responses have been excluded for clarity so percentages do not add up to 100)	2006		2007	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Feedback on my work has been prompt.	52%	28%	54%	26%
I have received detailed comments on my work.	59%	24%	60%	23%
Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	53%	25%	54%	24%

times in the 'negative comments' section of the NSS questionnaire completed by MMU students in 2007 – that is, in around 10% of the comment boxes. It was only mentioned 39 times in the 'positive comments' section.

Typical among the comments final year students provided were:

"Previous assignments are not given back to us quickly enough to use the feedback and make improvements."
"I feel that the level of

feedback we get is bad and although I am aware of many of my weakness[es] on the course I don't know how to build on them."

The National Union of Students is currently holding "The Great NUS Feedback Amnesty" in an attempt to collect together examples of feedback to support their campaign "arguing for constructive and consistent methods of feedback."(NUS, 2008)

We know that staff already spend a good deal of time marking and providing feedback, so it is disappointing that so many students feel that it is not timely or effective. The NSS and the NUS campaign simply highlight an area where we clearly need to develop: feedback is given for a reason and it is in all of our interests to ensure that it is effective. As part of MMU's Challenging Assessment Initiative, the Centre for Learning and Teaching is encouraging programme teams to produce and implement formal feedback strategies, and this article suggests ways in which they might go about reviewing their existing practice to see whether there are any areas where there could be improvements in efficacy and efficiency.

What would be covered in a feedback strategy?

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education states that:

Institutions [should] provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment.(QAA, 2006)

According to Nicol and Macfarlane, (2006),

"*good feedback practice:*

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);

2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;

3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;

4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;

5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;

6. *provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;*

7. *provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.*"

Most people will be doing all of this already; having a formal policy makes it easier to explain your approach to colleagues and to students, enables you to check processes more systematically, and introduce changes which fit in with the policy. It should also protect you from the insatiable demands of marking and feedback by setting clear limits for what you will be doing and relating it clearly to student outcomes. The aim should be to have a strategy which enables unit co-ordinators to produce a feedback statement for each unit which supports the programme aims, such as the sample statement shown in Figure 1.

Planning marking and feedback at the same time as making a teaching plan makes life much easier. Of course, that looks obvious when it's written down, but how many

of us do it as a routine? It's too tempting to try not to think about marking and feedback until the evil hour arrives. However, planning ahead will help both you and your students. If you have a very clear idea of the ways in which you plan to feedback, you will find it easier to provide opportunities for students to practice whatever it is and to give them useful feedback on their efforts.

A feedback strategy which meets the QAA advice and demonstrates the good practice identified by Nicol and MacFarlane might contain guidance on the following areas:

*   The purpose of feedback in the context of the programme or departmental aims

*   What should be covered in feedback

*   Quantity and format of feedback

*   Timing of feedback

*   The use of generic feedback and model answers

*   Feedback on exams

*   Enabling students to engage with and reflect on feedback

This paper will look at each of these areas in turn.

Sample feedback statement for a unit

The assignment for this unit must be submitted on the dates indicated in the unit handbook. I will provide feedback within four weeks of this date. My individual feedback to you will consist of

*   a mark
*   a copy of the assessment criteria grid (see programme handbook) with highlighting to show where you have achieved the different criteria
*   an indication of which parts of the assignment you carried out well
*   an indication of where there is room for improvement together with individual suggestions for how to do this if appropriate

In most cases this individual feedback will be brief and in addition to this individual feedback I will provide generic feedback to the whole group during our session in week 20 which will go through some common successes and areas for development on the assignment. I will discuss individual assignments during office hours on condition that you have reflected carefully on the feedback, both individual and generic, in relation to your own work.

Figure 1: sample unit feedback statement

Purpose of feedback

The Academic Regulations and Procedures Handbook section on Assessment Practice and Policy has a clear statement on the purpose of feedback at MMU:

Feedback on assigned work is an integral part of the assessment process and has several purposes:

- To help students to understand how others have interpreted their work against the given criteria

- To motivate students to continue to learn

- To enable students to identify areas for development

(Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007)

It's unlikely you would want to remove any of these elements from a feedback strategy, although you might wish to add things. Whilst they may seem self-evident, they may not always find their way into practice. When discussing purpose, it may be useful to look at these three elements and consider how current practice relates to each of them. Is feedback always produced for the students, or are other audiences sometimes in your mind, such as colleagues who may be second marking, or external examiners? Is the need to motivate students to continue always considered? Can advice on future development be found in every piece of feedback?

What should be covered in feedback

Students need to know to what degree they have managed to achieve the unit learning outcomes, and receive some suggestions about what they should concentrate on in future assignments. The feedback should enable the students to learn from what they have done and from your judgement of it rather than simply be a critique of the document in front of you.

Phil Race suggests that feedback is better thought of as 'feed forward' (Race, 2005) and if you think of it in that sense, it should contain:

- details of what would have been necessary to get a higher grade

- suggestions for things to try in the next assignment

- suggestions about sources

For your strategy, you need to provide a summary of what kinds of areas will generate feedback for each assignment – this may lead naturally from your existing assessment criteria or you may need to revise these at the same time. For example, if your unit or programme learning outcomes and assessment criteria don't cover transferable skills such as writing or oral presentation, and you think that they are important, then the outcomes and/or the criteria may need to be revisited . If they need specific help (eg on spelling, grammar or structuring work) then indicate where they should go for this (in these cases your first suggestion should be the Faculty Student Support Officer).

If students have few areas for development then there may not be much need to give as much feedback, but remember that even a good 2(i) still leaves at least 31% of marks to be achieved. It is still important to reinforce their good performance – this can be done in individual feedback by using phrases like "the steps you took to research this topic were appropriate" or in generic feedback: "those who did ……. performed very well on this assignment". You also need to motivate them to continue to develop; they need to know what would have got them a first class mark. This is a useful area for discussion as you produce a policy. Discussing what might move people from an upper second to a first class mark, and what kinds of feedback might be used can uncover differences in opinion in a team, which need to be resolved if you are to present a consistent approach.

Quantity and format of feedback

It would be easy to assume that improving feedback simply means providing more feedback but this isn't necessarily the case. There are many factors involved in the provision of effective feedback (ie feedback that students actually go on and use to help them to improve). One thousand words of feedback on an essay, however carefully crafted, will be fairly useless if it's received after the deadline for the next assignment submission. Equally, some students find it very difficult to engage with certain types of feedback for a variety of reasons and for those students, however much you produce you will not be helping very much. As Knight and Yorke have pointed out

 "lack of success is likely to discourage performance-oriented students, whereas those who are learning-oriented are stimulated to further success"

(Knight and Yorke, 2003).

We are all familiar with the sight of uncollected assignments, probably marked under pressure of a deadline, and filled with helpful comments which may never be read. In a study at Wolverhampton, 46% of academic staff said that over 20% of the assignments they had marked, with feedback, remained uncollected (Winter and Dye, 2004). One might speculate

---

[1] (see our resource on aims and learning outcomes http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/curriculum/aims_and_learning_outcomes/index.php).

that such a response might encourage learning-oriented staff to try another approach, but that performance-oriented staff would be very discouraged and less likely to make an effort next time. When you are discussing feedback as a programme team or a department, try not to be discouraged by such experiences. This is not an exact science and no single approach will work for every learning situation and every student.

Rather than focus on what has happened in the past, try to think about producing a scaffolding of feedback engagement which varies the type, timing and quantity of feedback across a programme so that all students have an opportunity to find something which works for them, and staff can select something which suits their teaching style. It's really important to remember that tutors are effectively giving students feedback every time that they interact with them. There is a continuum of feedback activity and if you can link normal day to day learning and teaching with the more formal situation of feedback on assessed work, you may be more likely to find a good balance.

It's also important to think about how you will communicate to students where they are receiving feedback and what they should do with it. Ideally each unit will include some class time where assessment and feedback are explained before assignment deadlines, followed by some interpretation after work has been handed back. It's particularly important to encourage students to identify feedback in different contexts and to understand that feedback is not only something written on a sheet handed back with their work, but that it may occur in many teaching and learning situations.

Examples of different types of feedback might be:

- Written reports (the classic 'feedback sheet')

- Oral reports made using a voice recorder and loaded onto WebCT or made directly in WebCT using Wimba voice Tools

- Video reports using a webcam

- 'Tick sheets' where areas for development are highlighted from a generic selection

- Use of standardised comments with the help of a software package (see Willson, 2004)

- One to one tutorial feedback eg for dissertation students

- Instant feedback in a practical situation or as part of a teaching activity ("thanks for answering that question" in a lecture, "watch out that your beaker doesn't overflow" in the lab, etc)

- Using peer assessment

- Self-assessment checklists

- Generic feedback to the group

- Model answers

This is not an exhaustive list, nor is it in any particular order. A long list, together with an indication of the learning 'pay-off' versus efficiency can be found in Chapter 5 of Phil Race's book called 'Making Learning Happen' (Race, 2005) and you may well find it useful to review this list whilst discussing types of feedback. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of each type here, but help is certainly available from the Centre for Learning and Teaching with the implementation of any of these examples which may be unfamiliar to you.

Your strategy could indicate which form of feedback will be used in which situations and give a rough idea of how much might be expected in each case (eg 60 second audio clip, completed one page checklist). Of course the decision will depend on the type of assignment. A checklist might be

good for giving instant feedback after a presentation, while a detailed written report might work better for an essay.

You will also want to consider what feedback is appropriate at what level of the award. For example, you might focus more on the functional and technical aspects of the submission at level four than is necessary at level six. Assessment criteria and feedback plans are unlikely to be the same for each level of an award.

Timing of feedback

We'd all agree that feedback needs to be timely. This is a handy word that means "provided when the student will benefit most from it". It does not mean "fast". When planning your strategy, look at each of the different types of feedback you've decided to use and estimate how long it will take to provide feedback on each assignment, given the numbers of students. Take into account any technical considerations, such as how long it takes to collect in assignments and distribute them to markers, time needed to upload audio or video files, and so on. An estimate of the expected feedback date should then be published in the unit handbook along with the assignment submission deadline. If it looks as though the logistics will make it likely that some feedback will take an unacceptably long time to produce, or will place an unacceptable strain on individual members of staff, then think about some ways of mitigating the delay, such as:

- Sharing the marking across the team

- Providing some generic feedback to the group after having marked a sample of submissions, which highlights common strengths and weaknesses (see section on generic feedback and model answers, below)

- Carrying out peer marking on the submissions during teaching sessions so that students continue to think about the assignment while the tutor marking is completed

- Asking students to carry out a self-assessment so that they review the submission after a short break, again so that they continue to think about the assignment (see section on engagement below)

The use of generic feedback and model answers

Part of your discussions about strategy should be around whether and when to use generic feedback and model answers.

If you find yourselves thinking and writing similar comments on lots of feedback forms, then generic feedback can be a sensible way of highlighting common successes and problems with an assignment, and pointing the whole class towards areas of development. Generic feedback can be easier for some students to absorb than individual feedback on something in which they may have made a large personal investment, although, on the other hand, there will be those who think this generic stuff can't apply to them, so it shouldn't be used for everything in a programme.

You can provide generic feedback verbally or in writing. It may be most effective during a timetabled session, if you see the whole class together and if your attendance is good. You can just take 10 minutes to:

Reiterate what you expected from the assignment

- Summarise which elements were generally produced successfully – you can even give a couple of examples if there was anything very good but it's probably

better not to name names here – the people concerned will know who they are and may prefer not to be singled out unless it is a small group who know each other well.

- Summarise any common problems: academic writing skills, missing the point of part of the assignment, poor referencing, etc. It's best not to give any examples here; you might inadvertently embarrass someone who might give themselves away or have shown their assignment to someone else. Provide information or links for further development of these areas or indicate where revision is needed. Say why it's important to develop this aspect for future assignments, even if you won't be assessing it again in this unit (and if you don't know what they will be doing in other units, find out)

- Explain briefly how to use this information to go back over their own work and learn for future assignments – you can't say this too often, even if you do feel like a stuck record.

A one page handout with that information on will be useful to jog memories later, as well as for those who didn't attend; this can be provided online or left for non-attenders to pick up in the departmental office or wherever you usually distribute such papers.

For some assignments a model answer can be useful – for instance in situations where there are 'correct' answers such as a mathematical problem. For most undergraduate assignments, however, this won't be the case, and a model answer may cause confusion or anxiety, or encourage formulaic approaches in the next assignment. It's probably better to provide an outline answer which summarises a possible structure for the assignment and gives examples of the kinds of points you were expecting. If you do this, reinforce

the point that these are just examples of a variety of approaches.

Model answers and generic feedback are most useful when provided very soon after the assignment has been submitted, and the work done is still fresh in students' minds. If no authorised extensions have been given then this could possibly be done within a few days of submission, if you have had time to look at a sample of submitted assignments and prepare an overview.

However, if authorised extensions have been given (see Appendix 1 of the undergraduate regulations) then model answers and generic feedback for that assignment can't be discussed before the agreed extension date, because those who had not yet submitted would have an advantage. In this situation you will need to wait longer to give generic feedback or provide model answers, or you might like to consider whether alternative assignments should be set for students who have signalled exceptional factors. Feedback on standard assignments might then be returned more quickly to those who had submitted the standard assignment on the due date. Such assignments would need to be set at the outset of the unit and students would then be 'warned' in advance that if they are likely to need extra time then they would have to work on the alternative assignment.

Giving an alternative assignment might be construed as a disadvantage to a student who already has difficulties, so careful thought needs to be given to the nature of such an alternative. In practice, students who need more than 3-4 weeks extra time for an assignment are likely to be in need of support from the University beyond that which a tutor is able to offer: it's important also to have a process in place for identifying them and referring them appropriately. Talk to the Learning Support team if you have any concerns about this.

Feedback on exams

If you want students to learn from their examination experiences, then you should of course be providing feedback on their performance in those exams. However, in practice, examination scripts are not returned to students; also, students may no longer be available to receive feedback once marking and moderation are complete, as exams are usually at the end of the academic year. The chances of students having forgotten what they put in May's exam paper when they return in September are pretty high. A good compromise here is to review examination performance with students at the beginning of the new academic year, in a related unit. You could get them to go over the exam questions and produce model answers for discussion in class.

Enabling students to engage with and reflect on feedback

The frustration of seeing feedback sheets gathering dust in the receipting office has already been mentioned. Even when the feedback is collected, many tutors suspect that some students focus more on the mark than on their carefully prepared feedback. It's also very frustrating to see the same mistakes repeated assignment after assignment. Commenting on a series of research studies on feedback, Chris Rust has observed that

"..the emotional and psychological investment in producing a piece of work for assessment has a much stronger effect on the student that the relatively passive receipt of subsequent feedback. Consequently, if asked to repeat the task sometime later the student is likely to replicate what they did the first time, including the mistakes, despite the fact that these were pointed out, and supposedly 'corrected' in the feedback"(Rust, 2002).

As a team, you could talk about some different ways of handling this. If you have implemented the elements listed above in your strategy, then you should be on the way to providing feedback that students can use, but you may still need to add a couple of other factors.

Firstly, you need to have a team commitment to feedback and its value. That may sound daft: you are all producing and distributing feedback already, but you may find it useful to think about what you do with it afterwards, as well as what students do with it. As a programme team, you may find it useful to make time to review all assignments, including examinations, and look at student performance systematically. This might mean holding a meeting once marking is complete at the end of the academic year, to produce some generic feedback across all assignments which will be discussed with classes at the beginning of the next year. This also gives an opportunity to provide feedback on general examination performance. This might take the form of

"many students didn't realise that we were looking for……. in that assignment; some of you could have improved your performance by ……".

It also provides an opportunity to introduce the next assignments and relate them to previous ones.

Secondly, you might like to try out some strategies for focusing on feedback in one or two units per year. For example, you might like to try separating marks and feedback, giving back the feedback one week, and the mark the next. You might get students to reflect on the interpretation of the feedback by getting them to predict the mark they got from the feedback you've given. You could even offer them a bonus 5% for an accurate prediction, to encourage reflection. Of course, if you were to do this, you

would need to make rules for the attribution of the extra marks. They would need to submit the predicted mark to you by a certain date before the actual mark was released; you would need to specify the degree of precision required (eg to within a degree classification band; within 5%); your decision would be final. You also need time to compare the list of predictions with the actual list. Using technology could help here, eg getting them to submit the prediction as a separate WebCT assessment would get you both the marks you gave and the predictions in one table, which would be useful. A final activity would be to have a brief class discussion about why the predictions were or were not accurate. You might think that this is all taking classroom time away from the content of the programme, but by helping students to engage with the outputs of the unit as well as the input you should be helping them to improve their understanding and performance.

If you have two assignments in the same unit, then you can use some of the marks available in the second assignment to reward students who show how they have acted on the feedback in the first assignment. This could just be asking them to provide a simple statement at the end of the assignment which explains what they did in response to the feedback and indicating where the evidence for improvement can be found in the second submission. Any marks you give for this should be on the quality of the statement rather than their actual improvement, which will be marked anyway as part of the second assignment.

Finally, make sure that you all have clear ideas about the kinds of language that should be used in feedback and that everyone is primed to "*take care with the important words*", as Phil Race puts it. (Race, 2005). You could try looking at previously issued feedback and discuss whether or not you felt it used appropriate language and if not, how you might improve it.

Getting More Help

There is no one approach which will improve the ways in which students benefit from the provision of feedback on assigned work and each programme team needs to discuss and develop its own strategy using the guidance provided here as a basis for discussion. The Centre for Learning and Teaching can support programme teams as they implement a feedback strategy; please contact me for further information and references, or look at our website under Resources.

References

Knight, P. T. and Yorke, M. (2003) *Assessment, Learning and Employability,* SRHE/OUP. Manchester Metropolitan University (2007), *Academic Regulations and Procedures Handbook,* http://www.mmu.ac.uk/academic/quality_assurance.php accessed 29/05/08

Nicol, D. and Macfarlane, D.,(2006), Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice,*Studies in Higher Education,* **31,** 199-218.

NUS (2008), *The Great NUS Feedback Amnesty,* http://www.nusonline.co.uk/feedbackamnesty/275199.aspx accessed 03/06/08

QAA (2006), *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education,* http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section6/default.asp accessed 28/05/08

Race, P. (2005) *Making Learning Happen: A guide for Post-Compulsory Education,* Sage.

Rust, C. (2002), The Impact of Assessment on Student Learning: How Can the Research Literature Practically Help to Inform the Development of Departmental Assessment Strategies and Learner-Centred Assessment Practices?,*Active Learning in Higher Education,* **3,** 145-158.

Unistats (2007). National Student Survey (http://www.unistats.com)

Willson, J. (2004), Enhancing Feedback to Students: Technology Can Help,*Learning and Teaching in Action,* **3**.

Winter, C. and Dye, V. (2004), *An investigation into the reasons why students do not collect marked assignments and the accompanying feedback,* http://wlv.openrepository.com/wlv/bitstream/2436/3780/1/An%20investigation%20pgs%20133-141.pdf accessed 8/1/8