Using Formative Assessment to promote student learning

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Task: think of two experiences where you have received feedback:

• One where the feedback was positive;
• One where the feedback was negative.

Think about both of these occasions:
• How did you feel?
• What did you do?
• What was the upshot?
• How could things have been different for you?
What is formative assessment?

• Formative evaluation requires a mark to be allocated which is then feedback to the students providing information on the level of the students performance (Miller et al 1998)

• Formative assessment must be pursued for its main purpose of feedback into the learning processes; it can also produce information, which can be used to meet summative purposes. (Black 1995)

• ‘The process used by teachers to recognise, and respond to, student learning in order to enhance that learning, during learning’. (Cowie and Bell 1999)
What’s the difference between formative & summative assessment?

“Summative contrasts with formative assessment in that [the former] is concerned with summing up or summarizing the achievement status of a student, and is geared towards reporting at the end of a course of study especially for purposes of certification. It is essentially passive and does not normally have immediate impact on learning, although it often influences decisions which may have profound educational and personal consequences for the student.” (Sadler 1989).
Formative and summative feedback: two ends of a continuum

• Formative assessment is primarily concerned with feedback aimed at prompting improvement, is often continuous and usually involves words.

• Summative assessment is concerned with making evaluative judgments, is often end point and involves numbers.
The role of the tutor in giving formative feedback (after Sadler)

- Superior knowledge about the content or substance of what is to be learned.
- A set of attitudes or dispositions towards teaching as an activity, and towards learners, including their own ability to empathize with students who are learning, their desire to help students develop, improve and do better, their personal concern with the validity of feedback and the veracity of their own judgments, and their patterns in offering help.
- Skill in constructing or compiling tests, in devising tasks, and generally in working out ways to elicit revealing and pertinent responses from students.
- Evaluative skill or expertise in having made judgments about student efforts on similar tasks in the past.
- Expertise in framing feedback statements for students.
Some problems with formative assessment

• Students may not take it as seriously as summative assessment, if it doesn’t ‘count’;
• It can be hugely time consuming;
• Students are likely to need different kinds of formative assessment at different stages in their ‘learning journeys’;
• It can be difficult to gauge how best to do it with groups of students who may be at different stages of development.
Why would we want to do it nevertheless?

• “The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point. In other words, students have to be able to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing during the doing of it”. (Sadler 1989).
Formative assessment and retention

- Modularisation has led to semester-end (rather than year-end) assessment. The consequence has been a reduction in the amount of formative assessment being given to students – and formative assessment is a critically important part of the learning process.” (Yorke 2002 p36);
- Students entering higher education from non-traditional backgrounds need reassurance that they are working on the right lines in low-stakes assessment activities.
Students self-perceptions

• Confidence often depends on students see their capabilities as being set in stone or malleable to change through hard work and strategic approaches.

• Some believe that that intelligence is fixed (an entity theory of intelligence, as evidenced by IQ scores) and that there is very little they can do to improve themselves.

• Others believe that ability is malleable and that hard work can lead to high achievement (an incremental theory of intelligence).
How this affects assessment

- Students who subscribe to an entity theory of intelligence need ‘a diet of easy successes’ (Dweck, 2000:15) to confirm their ability and are fearful of learning goals as this involves an element of risk and personal failure. Assessment for these students is an all-encompassing activity that defines them as people. If they fail at the task, they are failures.

- Students who believe that intelligence is incremental have little or no fear of failure. A typical response from such a student is ‘The harder it gets, the harder I need to try’. These students do not see failure as an indictment of themselves and can separate their self-image from their academic achievement. When faced with a challenge, these students are more likely to continue in the face of adversity because they have nothing to prove. (after Clegg in Peelo and Wareham 2002)
What can be done?

• Spend time and energy helping students to understand the importance of feedback and the value of spending some time after receiving work back to learn from the experience. Most students don’t do this at the moment, concentrating principally on the mark.

• Aim to get feedback on work back to students very quickly, while they still care and while there is till time for them to do something with it. The longer students have to wait to get work back, especially if they have moved into another semester by the time they receive their returned scripts, the less likely it is that they will do something constructive with lecturer’s hard-written comments.
Concentrate formative feedback where it can do most good

• Don’t give detailed written feedback to students on work that is handed back at the end of the semester if that area of study is no longer being followed by the student: just give a mark or grade;

• Give more incremental feedback throughout the semester;

• If university systems don’t allow this, change the systems!
Key issues in giving constructive feedback

• How to give accurate evaluations of weak work without destroying confidence?
• How to give bad news without pulling punches but without causing heedless damage?
• How to ensure that feedback to outstanding students is conducive to learning?
• How to cope with the workload?
Avoid using ‘final language’ (Boud)

- Avoid destructive criticism of the person rather than the work being assessed.
- Try not to use language that is judgmental to the point of leaving students nowhere to go.
- Words like “appalling”, “disastrous” and “incompetent” give students no room to manoeuvre;
- However, words like ”incomparable” and “unimprovable” don’t help outstanding students to develop ipsatively either.
Potentially damaging terms, use with extreme caution!

Totally irrelevant   Ignorant   Fatally flawed
Clearly inadequate   Grossly...
Riddled with errors...   Lazy
Obvious and basic mistakes   Useless
Completely lacking in   Stupid
Incoherent   Rubbish!   Worthy but dull
Completely inadequate   Senseless
Totally missed the point   Barmy
OK as far as it goes   Hopeless   And?
Negative but not necessarily destructive terms

Unfortunately…
Requires further research
An elementary grasp…
Many points are sound but …
Some good aspects but…
Rather fell apart when …
Lacks cohesion
Good effort but..
Redeeming features include..
Have not sufficiently drawn on relevant theories or concepts,
Have a basic understanding of the subject… but unfortunately
You need to obey standard referencing conventions
This needs rethinking in relation to..

Insufficient effort in relation
I was disappointed..
Significant shortcomings..
Need to act on…
Need to pay attention to
Need to seek support in…
Unclear with respect to..
A number of problem areas
You should consider trying..

And?
Positive but taking the student nowhere (use freely but note limits)

• Great!
• Fantastic!
• Super!
• An excellent piece of work!
• A+
• Impeccable
• Impossible to improve on this!
Concentrate on description, evaluation and remediation e.g.

• This is a well argued defence of the position and draws on a useful set of sources but you could..

• Your work shows great originality without neglecting.....but you might..

• There is much to commend in your approach which is scholarly and coherent but you haven’t..

• You have achieved a high standard by comparison with..

• Where you have drawn on established methodological practices this is excellent but
Giving feedback to students

Consider what are the specific purposes of this piece of feedback (e.g. early encouragement, detailed correction of errors, suggestions for further work to advance thinking, encouraging students to ‘break out of the mould’, late stage minimal feedback in conjunction with summative assessment…)

What is the level? What is the stage? What are the particular features of this cohort?
Giving feedback to students with diverse abilities

• Students at the top end of the ability range sometimes feel short changed by minimal feedback;
• Students with many weaknesses easily become dispirited if there is too much negative feedback;
• Consider giving an assessment sandwich. Start with something positive, go into the detailed critique and find something nice to say at the end (to motivate them to keep reading!);
• Explore ways to incentivise (!) reading of feedback;
• Consider which medium to use for students with disabilities (e.g. don’t use bad handwriting for those with visual impairments or dyslexia!).
Modes of assessment: pros and cons

• **Written feedback**: time consuming, provides a permanent record, can be carefully worded, can be used in evidence against you, can be compared with other students’ comments and…

• **Oral feedback**: immediate, ephemeral, can be time-efficient, may be hasty or ill-considered, can be wrongly remembered, tone of voice and body language can add emphasis or soften the blow and…

• **Taped feedback**: can feel artificial, equipment can let you down, provides a record, must be listened to in real time, time-efficient, can be shared by several students, can be quality audited and…

• **Emailed feedback**: practically instantaneous, students get feedback when they still care, needs marker to have a big computer desk, tone can be an issue and..
My top guidelines for effective feedback

• Don’t spend ages on writing idiosyncratic feedback to students who won’t read it;
• Be aware of the impact of your own fatigue and frustration on the type and level of feedback that late-marked students receive.
• Always ask yourself “Is there an easier way I can be doing this?”
• Just because it’s always been done in a certain way doesn’t mean it always has to be.
• Consider the feedback recipient at the other end of the process
Some further thoughts

• Just because s/he is an irritating little know-all in class doesn’t mean they don’t deserve a fair response.

• Just because s/he normally produces excellent work doesn’t necessarily mean that this piece is too, or that they don’t need further guidance.

• Poor presentation doesn’t necessarily mean sloppy thinking (and if it isn’t a criterion, it shouldn’t bring down the mark).

• Is this piece of work full of mistakes, or just one mistake repeated a lot?
Building in formative assessment

• Explore ways in which assessment can be made integral to learning.
• Constructively align (Biggs 2003) assignments with planned learning outcomes and the curriculum taught:
• Provide realistic tasks: students are likely to put more energy into assignments they see as authentic and worth bothering with.
Use formative assessment to promote independence

• Investigate how learning can be advanced in small steps using a ‘scaffolding’ approach;
• Provide lots of support in the early stages when students don’t understand the ‘rules of the game’ and may lack confidence;
• This can then be progressively removed as students become more confident in their own abilities.
Helping students understand what’s wanted

The hardship was not understanding. When they give you an assignment and say it was on this handout. But my difficulty is not understanding what to do at first… I think that there’s a lack of my reading ability, which I can’t blame anyone for. I can only blame myself because I don’t like reading. And if you don’t read, you’re not going to learn certain things. So I suppose that’s to do with me…..it’s reading as well as putting what you read into your essay. You can read it and understand it. I can read and understand it, but then you have to incorporate it into your own words. But in the words they want you to say it in, not just: She said this, and this is the way it should be. The words, the proper language. (Bowl op cit 2003 p90).
Use formative assessment to help students with writing

• Devote energy to helping students understand what is required of them in terms of writing;
• Work with them to understand the various academic discourses that are employed within the subject/institution;
• Help them to understand when writing needs to be personal and based on individual experience, such as in a reflective log, and when it needs to be formal and using academic conventions like passive voice and third person, as in written reports and essays.
Use formative assessment to help students with reading

• Help them also to understand that there are different kinds of approaches needed for reading depending on whether they are reading for pleasure, for information, for understanding or reading around a topic;

• Guide them to become active readers with a pen and Post-its in hand, rather than passive readers, fitting the task in alongside television and other noisy distractions;

• Give them clear guidance in the early stages about how much they need to read and what kinds of materials they need to focus on.
Provide opportunities for multiple assessment

- Consider allowing resubmissions of work as part of a planned programme;
- Students often feel they could do more will work once they have seen the formative feedback and would like the chance to have another go;
- Particularly at the early stages of a programme, consider offering them the chance to use formative feedback productively;
- Feedback often involves a change of orientation, not just the remediation of errors.
Conclusions

• Concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental formative feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students, particularly those who have had a struggle to achieve entry to higher education.

• To do so may require considerable re-engineering not just of our assessment processes but also of curriculum design as a whole if we are to move from considering delivering content the most important thing we do.
Planning for action

• What single change would you like to make to your processes to maximise formative feedback?

• What aspect of today’s programme has made you think most productively?

• Which areas would you like to think more about?
Useful references

• Bowl, M (2003) *Non-traditional entrants to higher education ‘they talk about people like me’* Stoke on Trent, UK, Trentham Books


Bonus features: Streamlining feedback

This section is designed for those of you who are thinking “It’s all very well for her coming in from outside, probably never marked anything for years, has she any ideas what life is like in an HEI like this? And what about all the other things we’ve got to do apart from marking (which comes about at just the busiest time of the year), ….” etc.
To give feedback more effectively & efficiently, we can:

- Use model answers;
- Use assignment return sheets;
- Write an assignment report;
- Feedback to groups of students;
- Use statement banks;
- Use computer-assisted assessment;
- Involve students in their own assessment.
Why would we wish to streamline assessment?

- Larger numbers of students in cohorts;
- Ever-increasing demands on staff time;
- Staff indicate they spend a disproportionate time on assessment drudgery;
- The means exist nowadays to undertake some aspects of assessment more effectively and efficiently.
Implications of wider participation:

- Ever more diverse student population;
- Retention of diverse students is paramount;
- Research tells us assessment is central to retention;
- Feedback is at the heart of retention;
- Detailed and timely feedback is hugely demanding of staff.
Looking at the alternatives

• Each of the following methods aims to make giving feedback to students more effective and efficient.

• Any single method used exclusively is unlikely to be acceptable to students;

• Ring the changes so that your means of assessment provides a variety of different kinds of feedback
Using model answers: why?

• They give students a good idea of what can be expected of them;
• It is sometimes easier to show students than tell them what we are after;
• They can be time efficient;
• They show how solutions have been reached;
• They demonstrate good practice;
• The commentary can indicate why an answer is good.
Using model answers: how?

- Staff preparing an assignment can draft a model answer.
- Student work (or extracts from several student’s answers) can be anonymised and (with permission) used as a model;
- Text can be placed on page with explanatory comments appended (‘exploded text’);
- However, caution should be exercised in order to lead students to think only one approach is acceptable.
Assignment return sheets: why?

- Proformas save assessors writing the same thing repeatedly
- Helps to keep assessors’ comments on track
- Shows how criteria match up to performance and how marks are derived
- Helps students to see what is valued
- Provides a useful written record
Assignment return sheets: how?

• Criteria presented in assignment brief can be utilised in a proforma;
• Variations in weighting can be clearly identified;
• A Likert scale or boxes can be used to speed tutor’s responses;
• Space can be provided for individual comments
Written assignment reports: why?

• Provides feedback to a group as a whole;
• Allows students to know how they are doing by comparison with the rest of the course;
• Offers a chance to illustrate good practice;
• Minimal comments can be put on scripts
Assignment reports: how?

- Staff mark assignments with minimal in-text comment and provide grades/marks as normal;
- Notes are made of similar points from several students’ work;
- A report is compiled which identifies examples of good practice, areas where a number of students made similar errors and additional reading suggestions.
Feeding back orally to groups of students: why?

• Face-to-face feedback uses tone of voice, emphasis, body language;
• Students learn from feedback to each others’ work;
• Students can ask questions;
• Makes feedback a shared experience.
Feeding back orally to groups of students: how?

- Staff mark assignments with minimal in-text comment and provide grades/marks as normal;
- At the start of a lecture or seminar, the tutor provides an overview of class performance and orally remediates errors, clarifies misunderstandings, and praises good practice;
- Students have a chance to ask and answer questions.
Statement banks: why?

• Harnesses a resource of comments you already use;
• Avoids writing same comments repeatedly;
• Allows you to give individual comments additionally to the students who really need them;
• Can be automated with use of technology.
Statement banks: how?

• Tutor identifies a range of regularly used comments written on students’ work;
• These are collated and numbered;
• Tutor marks work and writes numbers on text of assignment where specific comments apply, or provides a written (or emailed) detailed commentary which pulls together the appropriate items into continuous prose.
Computer-assisted assessment: why?

• Enables feedback to be given regularly and incrementally;
• Saves tutor time for large cohorts and repeated classes;
• Can allow instant (or rapid) on screen feedback to e.g. MCQ options;
• Saves drudgery, (but not a quick fix);
• Can track the performance of test items.
Computer-assisted assessment: how?

- This should not be a cottage industry!
- Training and support both in designing questions and applying the relevant technology are essential;
- Testing and piloting of CAA items is also imperative;
- Make use of existing test packages (e.g. from publishers), colleagues with expertise and advice from software companies (e.g. QuestionMark)

Giving feedback electronically: you can use

- Emailed comments from you to students on their individual work.
- Overall comments delivered by email to the whole cohort of students or through a computer conference.
- Computer-delivered feedback. (There is an interesting research project currently being undertaken to give formative feedback to students on electronically submitted work).
Involving students in their own assessment: why?

• Available research indicates that involving students in their own assessment makes them better learners (deep not surface learning);
• S &PA have the potential to save some time for staff (but effort is front loaded);
• With the growth of independent learning, an element of independent assessment makes sense;
More reasons

• Students learning how to give feedback take the feedback they receive more seriously;
• Students can get inside the criteria and start to work out what they really mean;
• They are valuable for developing lifelong learning capabilities ("How do I know how I’m doing?").
However:

• Criteria need to be explicit and clear to all concerned from the outset;

• Assessment must use evidence matched against the criteria;

• Students and staff need training and rehearsal before it is implemented ‘for real’.

(A useful reference: Race, P. (2001) A Briefing on Self, Peer & Group Assessment in LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series No 9 LTSN York.)
Involving students in their own assessment

- Get students to peer each other’s work in class (drafts, posters);
- Ask them to critique an assignment they hand in, using the same assignment return form as you;
- Get students to peer assess each other’s presentations
- Get students to rate their contributions to a group activity.
Implementing self and peer assessment

• There are no quick fixes in assessment;
• Effective implementation needs careful briefing of all parties, rehearsal and unpacking;
• Self and peer assessment rely on the provision of appropriate evidence against clear explicit and readily-available criteria;
• You need to decide who (self, intra-peer, inter-peer) and how (formatively or summatively) you will implement it.
Students giving feedback to peers

- Can be hugely beneficial if managed effectively (but there are no quick fixes!);
- Students will need training or refreshing in purposes and practices of peer feedback;
- Work on language use is crucial;
- Building students’ expertise in giving peer feedback helps them get more from the feedback they receive.
Putting streamlined assessment into practice

• Which of these methods would you like to explore?
• What would you have to do to implement this? What might get in the way/block your endeavours?