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Commenting Constructively: Feedback to Make a Difference

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Introduction

This *Briefing* offers guidelines for giving feedback comments to students in ways that are most likely to make a difference to the quality of their learning. The focus is on how best to comment on work that has been submitted for evaluation, whether formal or informal, and whether the comments are handwritten, word-processed, given verbally, emailed or digitally recorded.

The guidance offered is wherever possible evidence-informed, drawing on published research and scholarship together with my own insights and reflections as a lifelong journeyman in the craft of feedback-giving. It must be emphasised, however, that feedback in higher education is – inescapably – contingent. It is always given on specific pieces of work that are undertaken to particular subject and course requirements and expectations of quality, and at a given level of study. The nine principles I outline are therefore not blueprints, but suggestions for your consideration as you reflect on your own particular responsibilities in feedback-giving.

1. Clarify your feedback priorities

There are many different functions which feedback can serve. In a review I have been undertaking of some fifty published studies of university teachers' feedback comments (Hounsell, 2014)[1], I have identified eight key functions of feedback. These are summarised in table 1, along with the comment types associated with each.

You can use this typology to reflect on which particular feedback functions you consider to be most important for a given course or level of study. Almost all feedback involves some degree of *evaluating, praising and encouraging*, and *developing and enhancing*. But feedback in the early undergraduate years, where the foundations of subject mastery are usually laid, tends to give prominence to *validating* (i.e. commenting on what meets, and what falls short of, requirements for assessed work in the discipline at that level of study) and *explaining* (clarifying why an answer falls short). At more advanced levels, where judgments are likely to be more nuanced, the more dialogical functions such *probing* and *prompting*, *summarising* and *conversing* tend to gain relatively greater prominence.

The typology in Table 1 can also be a means of checking, from time to time, how well your comments match up to your intentions for feedback. Achieving an optimal match may not be straightforward. Studies in North America have suggested that disproportionate attention is commonly given by university and college teachers to relatively minor matters such as grammar, punctuation and spelling rather than more major ones[2], while research in the UK indicates a relative dearth of comments on skills development compared to content, as well as a lack of attention to feedback aimed at *explaining* or *enhancing*:

> Where feedback is given, its prime function is to inform the students about their past achievement rather than looking forward to future work. Most feedback is mark-loss focused, not learning-focused, serving primarily to justify grade. There is a lack of explanation of what students have done wrong[3].

1 Hounsell, D. (2014). 'Feedback comments in higher education: towards a systematic review of evidence.' Paper pres. EARLI Assessment SIG Conference, Madrid, August 2014. Of the fifty studies, 31 were at undergraduate, 14 at master's and 5 at doctoral level.
2 Connors, R.J. & Lunsford, A. (1993). Teachers' rhetorical comments on student papers. *College Composition and Communication* 44.2, pp. 200-23.

But the research does bring good news, too, for UK studies have also shown that, once thae university teachers concerned had become aware of how few of their comments were actually geared towards improvement (i.e. comments that look beyond the present assignment just submitted to future work by the student[4]), they were able to increase substantially the comments they made of this kind in their subsequent feedback[5].

A major Harvard study confirms the value that, not surprisingly, students place on future-facing feedback:

> The comments that students identify as the most helpful are responses that straddle the present world of the paper at hand with a glance to the next paper, articulating one lesson for the future[6].

2. Focus your comments on what matters most

In an ideal university world, there would be ample time to comment on each student's work by going through it, in the well-worn phrase, with a fine toothcomb - pinpointing every gap, misunderstanding or looseness of terminology, no matter how minor, as well as commenting on the 'big-picture' aspects such as coherence, depth of analysis and overall clarity. In the 21st-century university, however, finding enough time for marking and feedback is almost always challenging, with less than happy consequences. Giving feedback can often feel stressful, an unwelcome chore, an experience that dissatisfies because of a recurring sense that, reluctantly, corners have had to be cut – or (with gritted teeth) that the task than can only be accomplished by working even longer hours.

A way to break out of this lockstep is to take a fresh look at your approach to commenting. This entails firstly, clarifying your priorities, as I've just suggested, so that the most important feedback functions are to the fore. Second, it entails asking yourself, for each piece of work that is to be assessed, how much time is reasonably available for commenting? The third question follows on from the first two, and is how can I make the best use of the time at my disposal to offer comments?   In many instances where time is at a premium, these questions can merge into a single one:

What are the three (or four, or five) most worthwhile comments I can make on this assignment?

'Worthwhile' here means what will be of most help to *this* student, at *this* point in the course, in advancing their learning. The most effective feedback is individually tailored, as doctoral supervisors generally recognise[7]; but at undergraduate level, where there are fewer opportunities to get to know students well,

Feedback function	Types of comment
1. EVALUATING	• critiquing, evaluating/judging • benchmarking • justifying the grade
2. VALIDATING	• verifying • identifying errors/ omissions/ weaknesses/ problems • correcting, instructing
3. EXPLAINING	• clarifying, explaining • elaborating/amplifying • demonstrating, illustrating
4. PRAISING AND ENCOURAGING	• making an observation, debating • pointing to an interconnection • responding as a reader
5. PROBING AND PROMPTING	• summarising, recapping
6. CONVERSING	• making a suggestion, advising • offering assistance • nurturing/inducting into a profession or discipline • action planning
7. SUMMARISING	• summarising, recapping
8. ENHANCING & DEVELOPING	• making a suggestion, advising • offering assistance • nurturing/inducting into a profession or discipline • action planning

Table 1 Feedback functions and types of comments: a typology

3 Glover, C. & Brown, E. (2006). Written feedback for students: too much, too detailed or too incomprehensible to be effective? *Bioscience Education 7* http://journals.heacademy.ac.uk/toc/beej//7.   c.f. Blair, A. et al. (2013). What feedback do students want? *Politics* 33.1, pp. 66-79
4 Walker, M. (2009). An investigation into written comments on assignments: do students find them usable? *Assessm & Eval in Higher Educ*, 34.1, pp. 67-78
5 Brown, E. & Glover, C. (2006). Evaluating written feedback. In: Bryan, C. and Clegg, K., eds. *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education.* London: Routledge, pp. 81-91. See also Walker, M. (2008). 'Feedback, assessment and skills development.' In: Rust, C., ed. *Improving Student Learning – For What?* Oxford, UK: The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, pp. 228–240.
6 Sommers, N. (2006). 'Across the drafts.' *College Composition and Communication* 58.2, pp. 248-257
7 Bitchener, J., et al (2011). *Best Practice in Supervisor Feedback to Thesis Students.* Wellington, NZ: Ako Aotearoa – The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence. http://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/best-practice-supervisor-feedback

it's usually necessary to view the student through the lens of the work submitted. In those circumstances, commenting is usually at its most productive when it's on work that is still in progress, and where the student is therefore being given feedback that he or she can put to immediate use in making revisions and improvements. (See Briefing 12, *Flipping Feedback*).

If you take this highly focused approach, however, you will need to give lower priority to minor corrections, or for instance to grammar or bibliographical matters. These can be addressed in other ways — for example, by insisting on the use of spellcheckers, making referencing conventions into an occasional group exercise in tutorials, or using a simple alerting system for language use[8]. However, in those subjects where consistent technical accuracy is absolutely crucial, you may have to adapt the approach, perhaps by agreeing with colleagues and students a notation system that enables inaccuracies to be quickly signalled for attention.

3. Be specific: state, elucidate, suggest how to improve

Comments on assessed work are usually of two broad kinds: overall or *general* comments on the work as a whole, and *in-text* comments that relate to a very particular item of text within it — a phrase, sentence or paragraph; a figure or table; or a reference to the literature. Where they are written, general comments typically come at the end, in an accompanying note or on an assessment form for the course or subject. In-text comments are made directly onto the text, alongside it, or in the margins, depending on whether the comments are handwritten or keyed in electronically. Whether you mostly make general or in-text comments or a mixture of the two is partly a matter of individual preference, but may also be influenced by the kind of work being assessed.

A recurring concern of students is that feedback comments – whether they are general or in-text – aren't specific enough. It may not be clear, for example, *why* something is incorrect, or precisely *where* the student's work has fallen short ("table confusing"/"evidence unsound in places"), or *how* they might go about remedying it.

You can try and forestall this by ensuring that, as and when appropriate, you offer three-step comments:

1. *state* what the issue is, or point out the error or shortcoming

2. *explain* why, how, or when and where it falls short

3. *suggest* what would be better, or how to improve

4. Personalise — but don't get personal

Feedback is unlikely to be 'heard' by students or appropriately attended to when it comes across as distanced and impersonal. The success of the feedback conversation depends upon establishing a degree of rapport between teacher and learner, and you can help this process along by trying to give your comments an appropriately personal touch, for instance by:

I. avoiding indirect speech and excessive formality, and aiming instead at a more conversational tone in your feedback comments — as in the examples below

II. using the student's name, wherever feasible. (It may not be possible in exams where scripts are anonymised).

    Thanks for your project report, Jo, which I enjoyed reading

III. opting to convey yourself not as an anonymous presence but as a person, a distinctive individual, e.g.:

    I found that …

    My impression is that/I thought that ……

    I'm not sure I fully agree with your analysis; it's a persuasive interpretation, but I did wonder whether you'd taken sufficient account of ….

IV. wherever the subject-matter permits, acknowledging also the student's own individual voice, e.g.:

    That's a very interesting interpretation that has given me pause for thought.

    I wouldn't necessarily agree with your analysis, but you put your case well

However, while personalising your comments is worthwhile, it is vital that you do not 'get personal'. There is extensive evidence that attributing shortcomings in assessed work to personal failings on the part of the student will be damaging to self-esteem, and therefore alienate rather than engage them[9]. Aim, then, to comment on the work, not on the student.

5. Blend criticism with praise

An unbroken stream of criticism rarely prompts a constructive response. It is more likely to discourage or demoralise students than spur them to corrective action. But unqualified praise is equally unproductive if it's given out routinely, rather than when and where it's truly merited, as students themselves generally recognise.

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8 E.g. giving an overall rating for use of English that judges it as 'good', 'satisfactory', 'needs more careful attention in future' or 'necessitates consultation with a language specialist'

9 See e.g. Shute, V. J. (2008). Focus on formative feedback. *Review of Educational Research* 78.1, pp. 153–189

As a broad rule-of-thumb, aiming to blend critique of what has been done less well with encouragement and praise for what stands out (or has at least been done competently) is generally viewed as the most constructive way forward. A common tactic is the so-called 'feedback sandwich', where criticism is topped and tailed with more positive comment, or even the half-and-half 'open' sandwich. Proponents argue that sandwiching 'softens the blow' of criticism and increases receptivity, but there is a contrary view that it may muddy the message[10].

A second option is to organise your comments under two columns, one headed 'Good things' and the other 'What could be improved' or 'Scope to enhance'. Similarly, you could use an assessment pro forma for marks and comments that has a built-in 'Where and how to improve' box. Or you could offer each student guidance on what to *stop* doing/what to *start* doing/ what to *continue* doing.

As with feedback comments in general, both praise and criticism work best if they are specific and focused. That applies to work that is excellent as well as to work which is not. Students who have done well need to know what made their work shine[11], just as those who did less well need guidance on the weak points in the work they submitted and how they might go about doing better. As Sommers has pointed out[12]:

> Students who repeatedly receive comments from their instructors such as 'I have nothing to say about this well-written paper' often stall as writers because they are never asked to do anything differently, never shown what skills they need to develop, nor are they engaged in a dialogue that challenges their own thinking.

Thirdly, it helps if you seek to sweeten the 'bitter pill of criticism'.[13] You can combine a critical comment with a positive suggestion; 'hedge' critique with a qualifier such as 'possibly', 'rather', 'a little'; or signal to the student that you are offering a personal response or view:

> *The introduction is perhaps a bit lacking in focus. I could see a case for setting out more explicitly what line you're going to take and why.*

> *In section 3 you make two compelling points, but these risk getting submerged in the many accompanying examples, and there would be merit in compressing these somewhat.*

> *Summarising the data in tabular form is a really good idea, but for it to work effectively wouldn't you need to spell out about what each column represents?*

> *Clear though your arguments are, I couldn't persuade myself that the supporting evidence is yet strong enough to substantiate them.*

> *I found it hard to follow each step in your analysis. You'll need to ensure that they're all made explicit.*

6. Engage students in the feedback conversation

No matter how well-crafted it is, the impact of feedback will be limited if the student is cast in the role of passive recipient. That would be to assume, amongst other things, that the teacher's comments will invariably be easy to grasp; or that he or she is uniquely placed to determine what kinds of feedback comments would most help the student to make progress; or that there will be relatively immediate and easily identifiable opportunities for the student to put the feedback comments to good use. And since each of these assumptions is open to question, the challenge is to identify ways of engaging students more actively in the feedback conversation[14].

One approach is to move away from after-the-fact feedback (where comments are given retrospectively on completed work) and towards feedback on work-in-progress, so that students have both a direct opportunity to act on teachers' comments, and a clear incentive to do so in terms of better grades[15]. As I have argued elsewhere:

> Feedback is likely to have much greater longevity if [an] assignment or assessment is imminently to be repeated, forms part of a linked chain of assessments within a module or course unit, or enhances students' evolving grasp of a core component (a key concept, say, or skill in interpreting data) of a wider programme of study[16].

Another approach is to give students a more proactive role in determining what sorts of feedback comments might be especially helpful to them. With more experienced students, for example, you could introduce elective feedback, where students are invited, when they submit their work, to indicate what they would most like the teacher to comment on[17].

10 Puzzlingly, perhaps, there is a dearth of empirical evidence of the efficacy or otherwise of the sandwich See Parkes, J. et al (2012). 'Feedback sandwiches affect perceptions but not performance.' *Advances in Health Sciences Edu* 18.3 pp. 397-407

11 See for example James, D. (2000). 'Making the graduate: perspectives on student experience of assessment in higher education.' In: Filer, A., ed. *Assessment: Social Practice and Social Product.* London: Routledge Falmer. pp. 151-167.

12 Sommers, N. (2006). 'Across the drafts.' *College Composition and Communication* 58.2, pp. 248-257

13 Hyland, F. and Hyland, K. (2001). 'Sugaring the pill: praise and criticism in written feedback.' *Journal of Second Language Writing* 10, pp.185– 212

14 See also Wise Assessment Briefing 10, *Feedback as Dialogue*, by David Carless

15 For a fuller discussion, see Wise Assessment Briefing 12, *Flipping Feedback*.

16 Hounsell, D. (2007). 'Towards more sustainable feedback to students.' In: Boud, D. and Falchikov, N., eds. *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education*. Learning for the Longer Term. London: Routledge, pp. 101-113.

17 See pp. 107-108 of Hounsell (2007).

I'm happy with the opening sections of my report, but less confident about the closing sections. Could you take a close look in particular at how it concludes, and say whether I've done enough to bring together the different angles? Maybe a diagram would help?

Similarly, you could ask students to submit their work together with a 'cover sheet', where they self-rated the quality of what they had produced against the assessment criteria[18]. Your comments, then, would home in on the biggest gaps between your ratings and theirs.

Thirdly, look for fruitful ways of blending your feedback as a teacher with peer feedback. The emerging evidence is that students learn even more from giving feedback to peers than receiving it[19], and that peer feedback can be a useful complement to, rather than a substitute for, teacher feedback[20].

7. Nest your feedback comments in a wider framework of support

If they're to really make a difference to standards of achievement, feedback comments can't be left to do all the work of scaffolding student learning by themselves. Ideally, they work best when they are buttressed by other strategies that can provide strong complementary support. Here are some options well worth considering:

- blend the provision of formal feedback comments on work submitted with more informal opportunities for feedback[21].

- create a discussion board on Moodle (or whatever your course website is) where students can post queries about assignments and assessments they are working on as well as on your feedback comments. Whether the reply to a query comes from you or a student peer, the discussion board enables every student on the course to benefit from the interchange. Over time, you're also creating an 'organic', cumulative set of feedback FAQs.

- encourage students to share their completed work (and the feedback comments they received) with one another. This helps expand their repertoire of expertise in writing and their inner grasp of the forms which high-quality work in the subject can take.

- identify opportunities for students to undertake (all or parts of) assignments collaboratively. Co-planning, co-drafting, co-editing and co-revising can have powerful feedback-like effects that boost students' skills in communicating information and ideas[22].

- enable students to gain skill in evaluating the quality of work in their subject — a capacity which, Royce Sadler argues, is indispensable in grasping the significance of feedback comments and being able to act upon them[23]. One way of pursuing this is via tutorial discussion of 'exemplars', authentic illustrations of completed student work that represent different levels of quality in the subject at that level of study.[24]

- save time in commenting by creating links to supplementary resources such as fuller explanations of what is meant by key assessment criteria (e.g. what counts as 'adequate evidence' or a 'coherent structure')[25], the correct method for tackling a scientific problem[26], or a guide to what is looked for in a given form of assignment[27].

8. Try out new ways of commenting

If, up to now, you've usually given your feedback comments in the same way, you might like to try some alternatives. Below are four variations on traditional handwritten comments on students' assignments and exam answers. In some instances, they can enable you to offer speedier, richer, more economical, or more engaging feedback opportunities to your students. Keep in mind, however, that there's invariably an initial 'learning curve' – for you, and for your students – before those benefits kick in.

Generic feedback. 'Whole-class' or generic feedback is especially useful in providing fast feedback comments to a group of students shortly after an exam (by email, say), or at an intermediate stage in a multi-step assignment such as a project or portfolio.

18 Norton, L. et al. (2002). 'Helping psychology students write better essays.' *Psychology Learning & Teaching* 2.2, pp. 116-126; Bloxham, S. & Campbell, L. (2010). 'Generating dialogue in assessment feedback: exploring the use of interactive cover sheets.' *Assessm & Eval in Higher Educ* 35.3, pp. 291–300

19 Nicol, D. et al. (2014). 'Rethinking feedback practices in higher education: a peer review perspective. *Assessm & Eval in Higher Educ*, 39.1, pp. 102-122

20 See for example Hew, K.F. (2015) Student perceptions of peer versus instructor facilitation of asynchronous online discussions: further findings from three cases *Instructional Science* 43:19–38

21 See Wise Assessment Briefing 9 by Kay Sambell, *Informal feedback: feedback via participation.*

22 See pp. 109-110 of Hounsell (2007).

23 See Wise Assessment Briefing 8, *Ah! ... So That's Quality*, by Royce Sadler

24 Handley, K. & Williams, L. (2011). From copying to learning: using exemplars to engage students with assessment criteria and feedback. *Assessm & Eval in Higher Educ* 36.1, pp. 95-108; Hendry, G. (2013). Integrating feedback with classroom teaching: using exemplars to scaffold learning. In: Merry, S., Price, M., Carless, D. and Taras, M., eds. *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: Developing Dialogue with Students*. London: Routledge. pp. 133-141

25 For a humanities and social sciences example, see Neville, C. (2008). *How to Improve Your Assignment Results.* Milton Keynes: Open UP

26 For an account of an exemplary initiative in a very large Chemistry class, see Bridgeman, A. & Rutledge, P. (2010). Getting personal: feedback for the masses *Synergy* 30, pp. 61-68 www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/30/

27 For a range of discipline-, course- and level-specific guides, see http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/pages/writing-guides. See also http://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials

generic comments focus on 'the big picture', such as major misunderstandings evident across a range of students; but an especially valuable role they can play is in highlighting options and possibilities — i.e. in opening students' eyes to a range of alternative ways of responding to a particular question or of going about a particular task.

Online and digital comments. Advances in technology have opened up new ways of giving feedback comments. Most straightforwardly, you can use the 'Comment' facility on a word-processing package such as *Word*, or on an *Adobe PDF* file, where it can be found under the 'Tools' menu. There are also dedicated apps such as *iAnnotate* which can offer a wider array of highlighting, commenting and editing options for tablets and smartphones.

Better still, many university teachers would argue, is software specially designed for marking and commenting. One is GradeMark on *Turnitin*, already available to staff at HKU. Another would be to purchase a commercial package such as *RedPen*. Both enable you to structure comments around key assessment criteria.

Before committing yourself to any particular option, however, it makes good sense to check for example whether it will be readily usable by your students as well as you; whether students can print off or save your comments; whether you can make (and retrieve) comments in flexible ways (e.g. when travelling, or when at home, on a laptop, tablet[28] or smartphone) rather than being tied, say, to a networked desktop computer; whether you can save time by easily storing and recycling past comments. It's also of course desirable to try out any option first in a low-risk way – e.g. on a few past assignments – rather than introduce it in a real course setting until you're confident in its use.

Audio. There is growing interest in giving audio-recorded feedback. This needn't be technically challenging. You can record comments on a smartphone, for example, and email them to a student as a MP3 file or post it to Moodle for downloading. More sophisticated options such as *iAnnotate* and *RedPen* allow you to embed an audio comment alongside a specific word, phrase or segment of a student's work.

In either case, what's recorded needn't be polished — indeed shouldn't be, since there's some evidence that students warmly value the authenticity of a real-life recording with the kinds of hesitations, reformulations and informality common in everyday speech. University teachers who have tried audio feedback typically find that they can say more in a given space of time than they could by typing, but some find nonetheless that it can be more time-consuming to give[29].

Flipped feedback. If you typically provide comments to students *after* they have completed an assignment, you could try inverting or 'flipping' your feedback so that your comments are given on work-in-progress and can be put to prompt and direct use. For more information, see the Wise Assessment Briefing *Flipping Feedback*.

9. Get as well as give feedback

Like any human activity, feedback benefits from feedback, but you're unlikely to learn much from questionnaire ratings of the conventional kind. Instead, try seeking finer-grained insights by inviting your students, from time to time, to note down particularly helpful or unhelpful examples of your feedback comments over, say, the preceding semester or academic year.

It can also be enlightening to team up with two colleagues for meta-feedback: each of you feeds in one example of student work (an anonymised assignment or exam script), drafts comments in their usual way on all three examples, and then meets informally to explore what you might learn from how you have each approached the task of commenting.

FURTHER READING

Burke, D. & Pieterick, J. (2010). Giving Students *Effective Written Feedback*. Maidenhead: Open UP/McGraw-Hill.

Harvard College Writing Program (2007). *A Brief Guide to Responding to Student Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences. http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_responding_to_student_writing.pdf

Jolly, B. & Boud, D. (2013). 'Written feedback: what is it good for and how can we do it well?' In: Boud, D. & Molloy, E., eds (2013). *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*. London: Routledge.

Lunsford, R.F. (1997). 'When less is more: principles for responding in the disciplines.' *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 69, pp. 91-104

Nicol, D. (2009). 'Good designs for written feedback from students.' In: Svinicki, M. and *McKeachie, W.J., eds. McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 13th edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage. pp. 108-124

Ramani & Krackov, S.K. (2012). 'Twelve tips for giving feedback effectively in the clinical environment.' *Medical Teacher* 34, pp. 787-791

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing.' *College Composition and Communication* 33.2, pp. 148-156

Speck, B.W. (2000). *Grading Students' Classroom Writing: Issues and Strategies. (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, 27.3)*. Washington, DC: George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Vardi, I. (2012a). *Effective Feedback for Student Learning in Higher Education. (HERDSA Guide)*. Milperra, NSW: HERDSA.

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28 There is now a version of GradeMark for use on iPads. See http://www.submit.ac.uk/en_gb/features/ipad

29 For a fuller discussion of audio feedback, see e.g. Killoran, J.B. (2013). 'Reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes, and digital audio media: reverberations from a half-century of recorded-audio response to student writing.' *Computers and Composition* 30 pp. 37–49