

# Feedback Literacy & Practices

## Students & Feedback

Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement, yet the right “goldilocks formula” of providing the perfect balance of constructive, positive, and meaningful set of responses to guide students’ learning can be difficult. Furthermore, many of our students begin their adventures in university without any experience of knowing how to use feedback effectively (Burke, 2009; Weaver, 2006), making our task as educators just that more complex. Part of our role as educators is to guide students’ in developing their feedback literacy (which is a learned skill) that will ultimately enable them to:

- **Appreciate** the feedback
- **Make judgement** about the quality of their work
- **Manage** their emotion in response to the feedback
- **Take action** in responding to the feedback (and close the feedback loop)

Research demonstrates that feedback literate students develop skills of evaluative judgment as part of reducing their reliance on teachers to inform them about their progress (Carless & Boud, 2018). Through repeated experiences of making self-evaluations, students learn to generate internal feedback and gradually acquire their own expertise in making more sophisticated academic judgments.

What should be noted is that **feedback is a powerful process loop for learning!** In a university setting, learners need these specific set of capabilities to make the most out of their feedback opportunities towards a successful learning experience and to carry those abilities beyond their tertiary education. The following set of checklist and tips have been collated to provide educators in the ABP Faculty with some key considerations to keep in at the forefront of their thoughts when providing feedback to students.

## Content of Effective Feedback

Educational experts highlight that through feedback, the key role of teachers is to communicate the rationale for enabling activities; explain how they operate, elaborate the potential benefits for students, and address challenges that students might encounter (Carless & Boud, 2018). Essentially, effective feedback answers the following 3 questions (i.e. what students are looking for):

1. **Where am I going? (the goals)**
2. **How am I going?**
3. **Where to next?**

Prof. Susan M. Brockhart (2008) argues that in order to provide students with effective guidance towards answering

Content	Description	Strategies of Good Practice	Things to Avoid
<b>Focus</b>	When a student is provided feedback explicitly centred on a focus (i.e. task, process, self-regulation, personal). <b>Helps students develop self-efficacy and judge their own work.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making comments about the strengths and weaknesses of a performance</li> <li>• Making comments about the work process you observed or recommendations about a work process or study strategy that would help improve the work</li> <li>• Making comments that position the student as the one who chooses to do the work</li> <li>• Avoiding non-task related comments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making comments that bypass the student (e.g., “This is hard” instead of “You did a good job because . . .”)</li> <li>• Making criticisms without offering any insights into how to improve</li> <li>• Making personal compliments or digs (e.g., “How could you do that?” or “You idiot!”)</li> </ul>
<b>Comparison</b>	When student work is compared to an <b>intended learning outcome</b> (ILO), criteria as described in a <b>rubric</b> or sometimes with the student’s own past work. <b>Helps students determine what the next goal should be.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparing student work to rubrics that have been shared ahead of time</li> <li>• Encouraging a reluctant student who has improved, even though the work is not yet good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing feedback on each student’s work according to different criteria or no criteria (i.e. not referencing the subject rubric and/or ILOs)</li> </ul>
<b>Function</b>	When student work is described without judgement and evaluation. <b>Helps students manage their emotions that would stop them from trying to improve.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying for students the strengths and weaknesses in the work</li> <li>• Expressing what you observe in the work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling students the work is “good” or “bad”</li> <li>• Giving rewards or punishments</li> <li>• Giving general praise or general criticism</li> </ul>
<b>Tone</b>	When student work is framed positively through describing how the works’ strengths match the criteria in the rubric and/or ILOs. These comments will go together with suggestions about what can be done for improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being positive</li> <li>• Even when criticizing, being constructive</li> <li>• Making suggestions (not prescriptions or pronouncements)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding fault</li> <li>• Describing what is wrong and offering no suggestions about what to do</li> <li>• Punishing or denigrating students for poor work</li> </ul>
<b>Clarity</b>	When student work is provided with information that can be easily understood as the teacher intends.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using simple vocabulary and sentence structure</li> <li>• Writing or speaking on the student’s developmental level</li> <li>• Checking that the student understands the feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using big words and complicated sentences</li> <li>• Writing to show what you know, not what the student needs</li> <li>• Assuming the student understands the feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Specificity</b>	When student work is provided with enough feedback information that students can draw conclusions about the choices they have made in task and determine what steps to take next.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describing concepts or criteria</li> <li>• Describing learning strategies that may be useful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using a lot of pronouns (this, that, etc.)</li> <li>• Copyediting or correcting every error</li> <li>• Making vague suggestions (“Work harder!”)</li> </ul>

Table 1. Feedback Content (adapted from Brookhart, 2008)

these questions, considerations need to be made in the curating of the feedback content. Table 1 outlines six dimensions of feedback content with accompanying “Strategies of Good Practice” and “Things to Avoid” for educators to reference when engaging in their own feedback practices.

To provide effective feedback it is important to consider the feedback focus. Hattie and Timperley (2007) distinguish **four levels of feedback focuses** that have different levels of impact in guiding and supporting students learning.

Firstly, feedback can focus on the **task**, which generally looks at errors, quality and any implicit attributes of the work (e.g. written assignments should be well written). This form of feedback is effective in supporting the students’ improving the immediate task, however it is difficult for students to apply guidance provided beyond the immediate task.

Feedback can also focus on the **processing** of the task as well as **self-regulating** (i.e. ability to self-evaluate and gain self-confidence). Focusing feedback on how the student has approached the task and devising strategies to develop self-awareness (e.g. prompt reflective questions) is identified as the most effective way in supporting students in mastering the task and scaffolding their ability to “learn how to learn”.

The least effective form of feedback is one that focuses on the **student as a person**, which is essentially a pronouncement of whether the student is “good” or “smart”. Often these are online statements of “good job” or “excellent work” and provides no further guidance on the task.

## Before You Go...

the above content may seem dense but it should be recognised that providing constructive feedback is a learned skill that takes practise. So the next time you are providing feedback to your students we encourage you to consider the following:

What **Focus** are you placing?

*Task, Process, Self-regulation, Personal*

What **Comparisons** are you making?

*To the criteria as set out in the rubric and ILOs*

What **Function** is your feedback taking?

*Descriptive vs Judgement*

How is the degree of **Tone** being projected through your feedback?

*Positive vs Negative*

What level of **Clarity** is in your feedback for to students understand your intent?

*Clear vs Unclear*

Is there enough **Specificity** in your feedback that the students will be able to take action?

*Nitpicky, Just Right, Overly General*

## Is My Feedback Good?

It can be a tricky task determining whether the feedback we provide to our students is creating strides in their learning. One way to overcome this is to consider feedback as a process loop involving an open dialogue between student and educator to ensure a successful learning and teaching experience. In this approach, student response and their own feedback is the criterion against which we can evaluate the success of our own feedback practices. Brockhart (2008) further suggests that the following questions can help determine the quality of your own feedback:

### Have your students learned?

Observable improvement in their work?

### Have your students become more motivated?

Observable behaviour where they demonstrate belief in their own abilities and take more control of their own learning?

### Has your class become a place where feedback is valued and viewed as productive?

Observed increase in students wanting to participate in peer-to-peer feedback or openly asking for more constructive feedback?

#### References:

- Brookhart, S. M. (2008). How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students. Alexandria, United States: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
- Burke, D. (2009). Strategies for using feedback students bring to higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 41-50.
- Carless, D., & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(8), 1315-1325.
- Dweck, C. S. (2007). The Perils and Promises of Praise: Praising students’ effort is more effective than praising inherent intelligence. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 34-39.
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.
- Weaver, M. R. (2006). Do Students Value Feedback? Student Perceptions of Tutors’ Written Responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3), 379-394.