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Feedback within 24 hours

Phil Race

It is widely accepted that feedback to students' work works best when it is received quickly, while they still remember clearly what they were trying to do in their efforts. The work in Australia of Sadler (1989, 1998, 2003), has consistently emphasised the role of formative feedback in leading students towards successful learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) look critically at a decline in the quantity and quality of formative feedback which students receive as class sizes grow in a climate of policies about widening participation in higher education. Bowl (2003) provides a wealth of detail about how students react to feedback (or the lack of it) in her book based on interviews with non-traditional entrants to higher education.

Yorke (2002) writes convincingly of the role (and speed) of formative feedback in addressing student non-completion, and Knight and Yorke (2003) continue the argument that there are major problems in higher education with assessment and formative feedback, an argument developed further by Race (2005).

Some feedback can be nearly instantaneous, for example when using computer-based or online multiple-choice exercises, where the feedback to choosing distractors (or correct options) can appear on-screen as soon as students select an option. Salmon (2004) illustrates the power of well-moderated online feedback to students, and discusses in detail what can be done to make online learning a productive and active learning experience.

However, it is often the case that students get feedback on essays, reports, problems-sheets, and so on much too late – it can take weeks to mark their work particularly if the class size is large. By the time students receive their feedback, they may well have moved on, and then they take very little notice of the feedback. Colleagues in many institutions complain that too many students don't even bother to pick up their marked work. Even when much care and effort and time has been put into writing the feedback, it often ends up entirely wasted! Life is too short to waste time on composing feedback that won't be read or used.

In this short paper, I argue the case that feedback (on paper, and face-to-face with whole groups) can often be given to students within 24 hours of them engaging with the work they hand in for assessment. Consider the following idea ...

1. Suppose that students are asked to bring their completed assignment (essay, report, whatever) to a whole-class session, for example a lecture – say the 1000-1100 lecture next Tuesday morning.
2. Advise them that the deadline for receipt of their work is 1000 on Tuesday morning, and the (only) place they can hand in that assignment is at the lecture during the first minute or two.
3. Ask all students to place their work in a pile on the lecture bench, in the first two minutes of the lecture period. By 1002 or so, you have all their work (and a good attendance).
4. As soon as you've got all of their work (e.g. 1003), hand out to the group a pre-prepared feedback sheet on the assignment concerned – on a coloured

sheet of paper (different colours for successive assignments) so that you can easily refer to the sheet. This feedback sheet can contain:

- Explanations to anticipated frequently-occurring problems;
 - Illustrations of components of a good answer to the assignment question;
 - Examples of useful source materials and references;
 - Model solutions of quantitative parts of the assignment (if applicable);
 - And so on. It is useful for you to number the paragraphs on this coloured feedback sheet, to make it easier for you to refer to its contents later.
5. Allow your class two or three minutes to scan through the feedback sheet (e.g. 1003-1006).
 6. Next, (e.g. 1006-1009) talk the whole group through one or two of the most significant of the feedback areas on the sheet, adding tone-of-voice, body language, eye contact to help the meaning of your feedback to be really clear to the students, augmenting one or two of the paragraphs on your feedback sheet.
 7. Then proceed with the lecture as normal.
 8. When you proceed to mark their work, you've now no need to write the same things on so many different assignments, and can make your feedback much more specific and individual to each student on his/her triumphs and disasters. This means that when they get your feedback, they pay much more attention to it.

Most of the students will still have been finishing off the assignment – or at least giving it a final check, *within the last 24 hours*. This means they are now getting feedback while they still have a very clear view on what they were trying to do in the assignment, and remember what their difficulties may have been. They are therefore getting a lot of feedback while they really *want* to know how their work will fare in assessment – they are thirsty for feedback at this point. Some students may indeed have only *started* on the assignment during the last 24 hours – these are likely to be the ones who need the feedback the most, and they are very receptive to it at this time.

“But what about students who don't hand it in on time?”

There are no extensions! The real world works on deadlines – for funding bids, conference contributions, job interviews and so on. It's good to train students to meet deadlines. Anyone who misses the deadline is not, however, completely stuffed. They have the opportunity to do 'Alternative Assignment B' which addresses the same learning outcomes as the original, but where the coloured feedback sheet is of no help. They hand the alternative assignment in at another deadline. (There are subtle ways of making alternative assignment B somehow less attractive than the original assignment!).

“If the feedback on the coloured sheet is so valuable, why can't we give out this guidance in advance of students doing the assignment?”

We can give out the guidance in advance – but it doesn't work! Even when students have detailed guidance, many of them read it, but soon get so busy doing the assignment that they ignore or forget most of the guidance, and still get into the (anticipated) difficulties that the coloured feedback sheet addresses. Feedback only really seems to work *after* students have done something.

“What, no marks?”

An extension of the above idea is to return students' marked work to them (after giving generic feedback as described above, and now containing specific individual feedback) to them *without* their marks. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) and others have commented on the negative affects associated with giving students

their marks and feedback at the same time – students are blinded by the marks, and the value of the feedback is eclipsed (Race, 2005). Then let students *use* the individual feedback on their work, and the generic feedback already received to work out their marks for themselves. Race (2006) suggests that if the students' self-assessment is within 5% or one grade point of the tutor-assessed mark, let the higher number go forward.

How this feedback method saves you a lot of time!

When you actually go away to mark your students' work, you can save up to two-thirds of the time you would normally have spent marking it. You save time and energy as follows:

- you don't have to write the same things on many different students' assignments – the common mistakes and difficulties have already been covered by your feedback sheet, and you can simply write 'please see point 5 on the green sheet' and so on.
- Because you've debriefed your students *orally* in the whole group about the most important points in your pre-prepared feedback, there's little need to mention these points in any additional feedback you write onto their assignments, other than to sometimes remind them of your oral debriefing.
- If you've included the process of asking students to self-assess their work, based on your generic and specific feedback, you can be sure that they have reflected on their work and on your feedback in ways which deepen their learning, making the time and energy you have devoted to providing both episodes of feedback all the more worthwhile.
- Your growing collection of feedback sheets continues to be available as evidence of your good teaching practices, and can be included in submissions to external examiners, professional bodies, and in your appraisal or review documentation.

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