Providing Feedback Online

Learnovate has compiled a series of guides to support Higher and Further Education lecturers and tutors. The purpose is to provide support in these challenging times to those providing teaching and assessment activities to their students through the use of digital tools and technologies.

Learnovate Report

This report was created by Learnovate at Trinity College Dublin.

1. Context

In light of the recent COVID-19 global pandemic there has been an urgent need to move higher education teaching and learning online. Lecturers have been at varying levels of comfort with this requirement. As a leading learning technologies research centre, Learnovate has compiled a series of guides to support lecturers and tutors. The purpose is to quickly provide support to those providing teaching and assessment activities to their students through the use of digital tools and technologies. Learnovate may well follow these publications with more comprehensive resources in the future.

Learnovate, hosted by Trinity College Dublin, is an industry-led centre of excellence for research and innovation in learning technologies.
Learnovate boasts a multidisciplinary team of specialist researchers in learning sciences, computer science, user experience and user-interface design – as well as industry experts at the forefront of e-learning and EdTech innovation.

1.1. Giving students feedback online

The importance of feedback cannot be underestimated. When in a face-to-face (F2F) environment, providing feedback to students can come very naturally as tutor's ask questions of students and provide immediate feedback , whether reinforcing or corrective, so students are aware of any misunderstandings and can move on with their learning. Tutors and lecturers also provide feedback to learners on activities and assignments, often through marking up of assessment pieces and the provision of associated grades.
In an online setting, a different set of challenges arise with regard to providing learners with feedback.
In this piece, we outline some of the best practices relating to providing learners with feedback in an online, distance environment as well as identifying some tools and technologies that can assist in this regard.

We hope you will find this information useful.
For any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact us at Learnovate.
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2. Giving students feedback online

2.1. What is it?

The definition of feedback is information from an agent, such as a teacher, peer, or other about one's performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The importance of feedback is widely known to be an important aspect of an effective learning experience. As one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, this impact can be either positive or negative and the timing of the feedback can be crucial (Cushing et al., 2011) (Boekaerts, 2002) (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Hattie and Timperley's article on the power of feedback discusses three types of feedback; namely, 'Where am I going?' 'How am I going?' and 'Where to next?' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). They state that 'feedback at the self or personal level (usually praise) … is rarely effective' and therefore, to encourage people to learn, a simple 'well done' or 'you got that wrong' rarely assists with learning while feedback at the process level is more effective. Providing feedback to learners on how they achieved what they achieved or where they went wrong in the learning process is a much more effective use of feedback for learning.

We will outline some best practices in providing feedback to students below.

2.2. What it does

Feedback helps to guide students' development with timely and frequent feedback from the course instructor contributing to student learning (Theile, 2003). Feedback can increase effort, motivation, or engagement to reduce the discrepancy between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood, and/or it can increase cue searching and task processes that lead to understanding (thus reducing this discrepancy) (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Feedback needs to provide information *specifically* relating to the task or process of learning that fills a gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood (Sadler,1989). This gap may be reduced through a number of different cognitive processes, including' restructuring understandings, confirming to students that they are correct or incorrect, indicating that more information is available or needed, pointing to directions students could pursue, and/or indicating alternative strategies to understand particular information' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Feedback has no effect in a vacuum; to be powerful in its effect, there must be a learning context to which feedback is addressed.
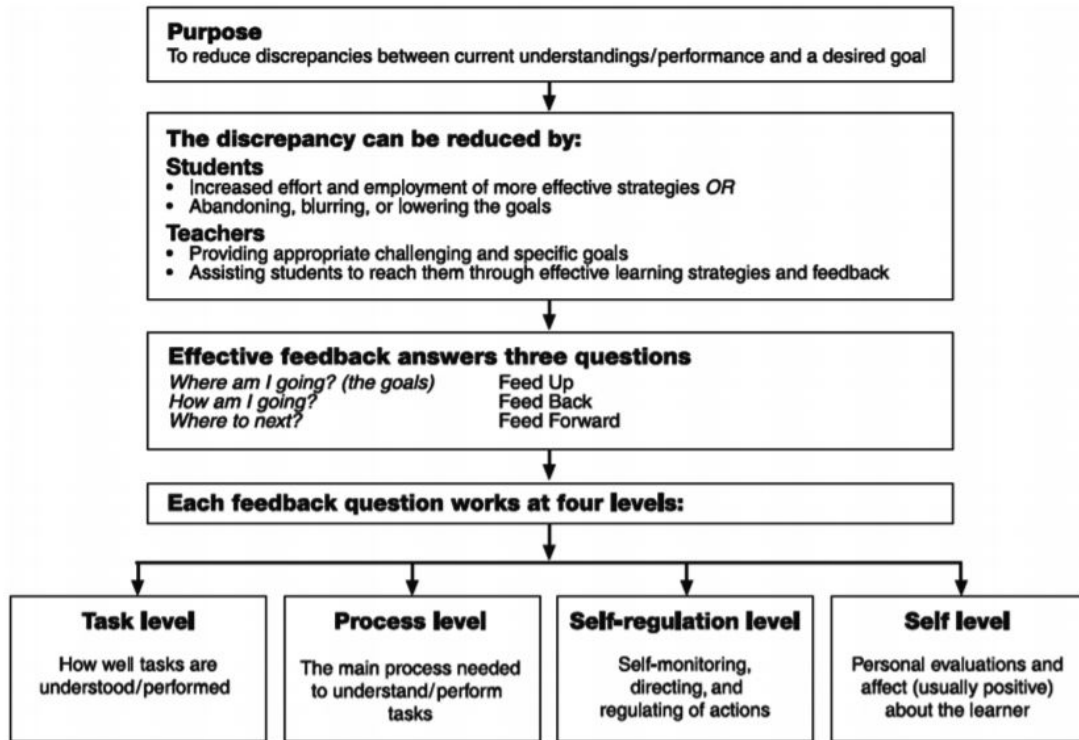
Purpose
To reduce discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal

The discrepancy can be reduced by:
Students
- Increased effort and employment of more effective strategies *OR*
- Abandoning, blurring, or lowering the goals

Teachers
- Providing appropriate challenging and specific goals
- Assisting students to reach them through effective learning strategies and feedback

Effective feedback answers three questions
Where am I going? (the goals)	Feed Up
How am I going?	Feed Back
Where to next?	Feed Forward

Each feedback question works at four levels:

Task level	**Process level**	**Self-regulation level**	**Self level**
How well tasks are understood/performed	The main process needed to understand/perform tasks	Self-monitoring, directing, and regulating of actions	Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner

Figure 1. Hattie & Timperley's Model (2007) of feedback to enhance learning

2.3. Why for digital?

Feedback can be easily provided to students in the face-to-face setting in the answering of questions in lectures and tutorials as well as through written comments on assignments and projects; however, in the online environment, feedback can be provided just as easily and almost as quickly.

Online learning environments and Learning Managements Systems often have integrated tools to allow tutors to provide feedback to learners online, while many also support peer-to-peer feedback mechanisms through comment functions on blogs and in discussion forums.

Even outside of these systems, there are a number of tools and technologies that help facilitate providing feedback to students, which we outline below.

2.4. Best practices

Leibold & Schwarz (2015) identified a number of best practices for giving online feedback to learners, such as ensuring that the feedback is:

- prompt
- frequent
- personalised
- detailed
- clear
- specific, and
- balanced.

For example, simply personalising the feedback by addressing the receiver by their name helps to improve the feedback and learning process.

This generates the need for well-crafted online feedback in the written, audio, video, or in the live synchronous web-based conference format. Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that feedback should relate to the process rather than the outcome to be most effective. This includes feedback about how well a task is being accomplished or performed, such as distinguishing correct from incorrect answers, acquiring more or different information, and building more surface knowledge.

Tutors can assist by clarifying goals, enhancing commitment or increased effort to reaching these goals through feedback; ensuring that students understand 'success criteria' is vital to the process of giving feedback.

When encouraging students to provide feedback to one another, it is important to outline up front what type of feedback is encouraged and how they can provide it to their peers. For example, outlining that each student is to provide feedback to at least two other students with three pieces of positive feedback and one suggestion is a useful way to ensure that this giving and receiving of peer feedback is a positive and engaging experience for students. Including peer-to-peer feedback as part of the assessment process may also help to encourage students to engage with the feedback experience.

Bonnel and Boehm (2011) studied best practices for giving feedback to online learners. Common themes emerged as:

1. Maximise technology
2. Use rubrics, templates, and automated responses
3. Have a system
4. Create a feedback-rich environment.

2.5. Tools to help

While using the 'review' function of MS Word to add comments to written work can be emailed to students, there are a number of particular tools that can be used for providing students with feedback in both synchronous and asynchronous online environments.

For example, the comment function in blogs such as Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) can be used for both tutors and peers to provide feedback to students.
Online discussion boards can be used to correct any misunderstandings while also providing opportunities for reinforcing feedback so that students know that they are going in the right direction.

Synchronous web-based conferencing such as Skype, Google Hangout or Zoom provides the opportunity for educators to provide feedback to students in a synchronous way. Similarly, tools such as Blackboard Collaborate and Blackboard Learn allow feedback to be given via voice or text chat.

In order to provide audio feedback to students, tools such as Audacity (www.audacityteam.org) and SoundCloud (www.soundcloud.com) can be used to record live audio, edit it and export it.

If your students need to present material for assessment, either as a group or individually PowerPoint's 'Record Audio' function allows students to submit a narrated presentation for assessment prior to lecturer/tutor sessions. This approach can allow students to be happy with their submission, lecturers to analyse and make notes and maximise the use of synchronous time online for feedback.

3. References

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