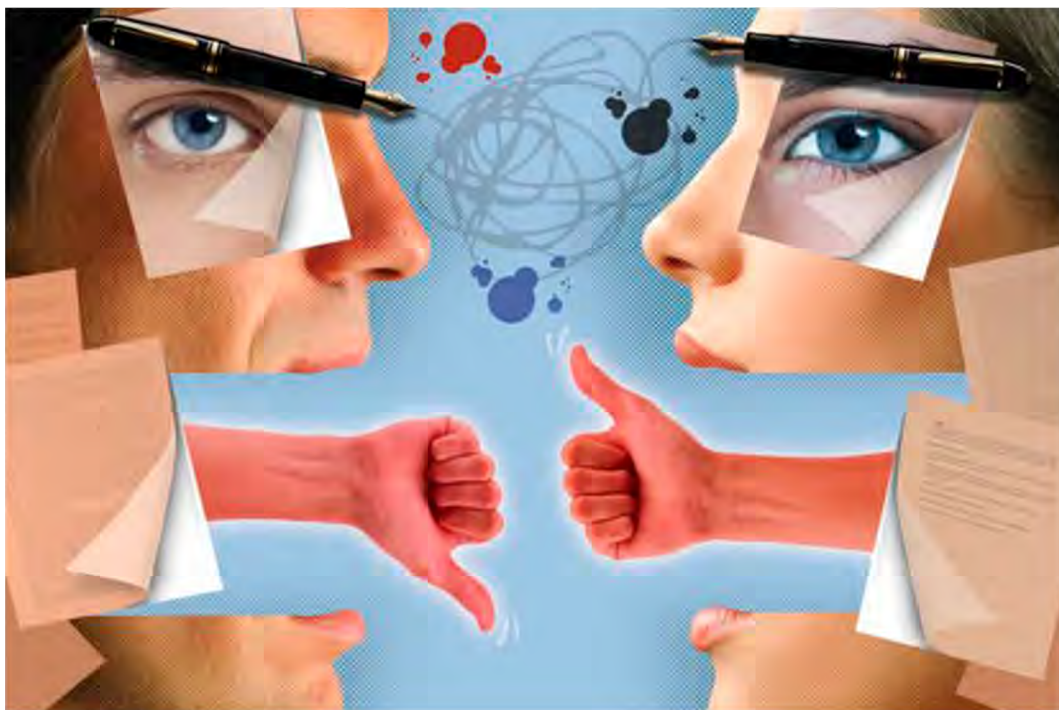


Can do better: here's how

Research is pinpointing ways to make feedback more useful to and satisfying for students and teachers alike. David Carless writes



SOURCE: PAUL BATEMAN

Feedback is one of the most problematic aspects of the undergraduate student experience. Successive National Student Surveys attest to that, and the issue is high on universities' agendas as they jostle for students in an era of high fees and uncapped numbers.

One reason for the dissatisfaction might simply be that no matter the frequency and quality of feedback that students receive, they will always want more. However, developing effective feedback in mass higher education is difficult: it requires time and careful thought, but classes are often large and teachers face multiple demands.

As for students, many struggle with feedback phrased in academic terminology with which they are not familiar. And even if they can understand it, they may not know how to act on it. Meanwhile, in some classes, the main formal feedback that students identify is the final grade they are awarded. So when they say that are not satisfied with the feedback, they may just mean that they wanted a higher grade.

In recent years, researchers have placed emphasis on delivering feedback in the form of dialogue with students. A key point is that students need to be active in generating, engaging with and acting on feedback, rather than just being passive, subordinate recipients of it.

One way to orchestrate this is to have students examine the work of their peers, identifying strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. Such processes begin to sensitise them to what good work looks like, and to differences between their performance and that of others. As they often do not feel comfortable awarding grades to their friends and classmates, asking them to provide comments instead is usually more effective. Another important research finding is that giving peer feedback is often more productive than receiving it because it is more cognitively engaging.

The main purpose of feedback should be to support students in self-evaluating their performance more effectively. All students are self-monitoring and make adjustments to work in progress, but some do this relatively inefficiently. Feedback is effective when it helps them to fine-tune their sensibilities.

Classroom activities that involve students in making judgements are particularly useful. A powerful way of helping students to develop their sense of quality is through analysing samples or working through problems together. As I have pointed out previously in *Times Higher Education*, when they enter into dialogue with their teachers about the nature of good work, they are being primed

to develop some of the connoisseurship of the expert ("What's in a grade?", 9 April 2015).

Technology also has a considerable potential role to play. The learning management systems or virtual learning environments that universities have established can provide a forum for students to involve themselves in conversations around course content or work in progress. They are generally more motivated to do so when marks are awarded for good contributions.

Student responses that help teachers to gauge learning progress are also particularly useful. Clickers or electronic voting systems can be used to collect students' views on a problem or issue, and the instant feedback they provide is also valued by students.

Audio feedback, whereby teachers record verbal commentary on student work and then send the file to them electronically, is attracting a number of enthusiasts. Some teachers find it convenient and time-saving, although others caution that it takes time to get used to a different way of doing things. Students generally appreciate the more detailed and nuanced feedback it allows, and it seems to strengthen their relationships with their teachers.

Empathy and trust are important in view of the risk of negative comments harming the self-esteem of students. However, the common approach of sandwiching criticism between positive comments has been found to lack bite, largely because of its formulaic nature.

Honest, constructive comments are more useful than empty praise, but it remains a hard line to draw. One person's constructive critique may be another's wounding criticism. So when providing searching commentary, it is useful to reiterate that the aim is to help the student to grow. Trust develops when you feel that a feedback-giver has your best interests at heart.

Students particularly appreciate timeliness in feedback. They value guidelines about what is required and advice on how they might tackle assignments. Traditional feedback, which occurs after completion of assignments, can be useful for highly motivated students but is often a relatively blunt tool. After all, if it is too late to act, there is no opportunity or incentive to close the feedback loop.

But there are strategies to inject more dialogue into conventional written feedback. For example, on the cover page of their assignments, students can be asked to state the aspects on which they would most like to receive feedback. This prompts them to reconsider their work and begins a dialogue with the teacher. It may also save markers time as they can focus their comments mainly on the issues identified by students.

For your typical academic, who regards marking an unpleasant academic chore, that may be a key advantage. After all, feedback processes should be satisfying for teachers as well as useful for students.

David Carless is professor of educational assessment at the University of Hong Kong. His latest book, *Excellence in University Assessment*, has recently been published by Routledge.