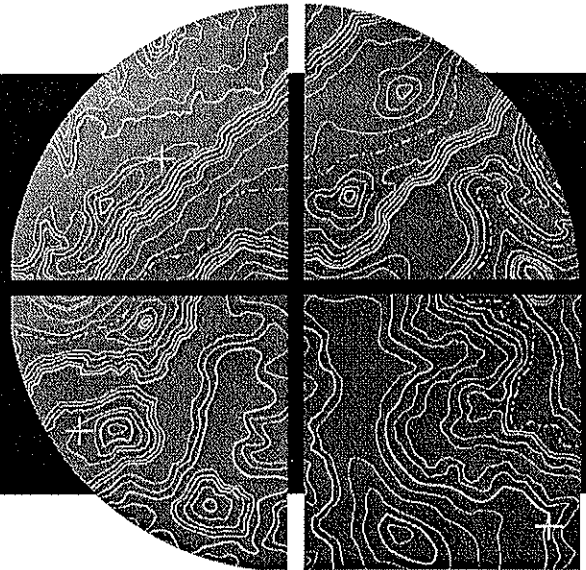


GEES Briefing 1



Giving Feedback

“You’re fired!”

Most of us will admit occasionally to having been fascinated by the television show *'The Apprentice'*, and will have watched as Lord Sugar pitches into young men and women after their teams have attempted to complete a business challenge. Whatever we may think about Lord Sugar's style of giving feedback, the obvious advantage of his tough approach is that the feedback is clear, unambiguous and to-the-point. It is delivered direct to the individual in a timely, albeit often painful way. They hear his harsh critique of themselves and their teammates, and they reflect upon the experience afterwards. Robust contestants presumably learn a lot.

We might debate whether this is an appropriate model for apprentice GEES students. Few GEES tutors give feedback in this way because an emotionally charged public scene is not regarded as the best way to enable our students to grow in confidence and understanding. Lord Sugar's apprentices are pre-screened, ambitious individuals, not the heterogeneous set of people more typical in contemporary HE. Moreover, in most GEES departments, the days of having a handful of students to whom frequent, detailed, individual feedback can be provided, are past. GEES tutors might nevertheless have a sneaking admiration for a system that ensures that feedback is delivered so compellingly, and acted on so speedily by suitably motivated disciples. Conversely, from the students' point of view, how frustrating is feedback that, despite its restrained and upbeat delivery, is illegible, irrelevant or too late, or that offers them little or no clue on how to improve their performance?



Geography,
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Professor Carolyn Roberts,
University of Oxford. February 2010

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What is feedback?

Feedback is the information provided to students describing their relative success with a piece of assessed work, or on other aspects of their learning. It can be the words written in the margin of an examination script, the commentary provided after a presentation at the end of a field class, or the tick box grade form used to explain and justify marks awarded for the elements of design and content in a web page. The GEES academic community is notable for the diversity and richness of the assessment strategies it uses, and the modes of feedback can be similarly innovative.

Feedback is the cornerstone of all learning and is key to helping students understand their progress, and to becoming more effective independent learners (Orrell 2006). Effective feedback identifies strengths and weaknesses, provides clear guidance on how future performance can be improved; it encourages, stimulates and empowers the student. It has an emotional as well as an intellectual impact, and it balances comprehensiveness against inspiration. However, meeting this demand is potentially a challenging task for the busy GEES tutor.

Feedback and Assessment

Just as learning and assessment are intertwined, so are assessment and feedback. It is axiomatic that the assignment brief must include clear guidance about the intended learning outcomes, and the assessment criteria that will be used in marking the work. Feedback needs to be seen as pivotal to the individual student's learning process, not a perfunctory add-on. It allows each student to chart their development towards whatever goal is desired. It is only through socialisation and repeated engagement with feedback that the tacit knowledge of what being a geographer, geologist or environmental scientist is, emerges in the student. Only then can they understand appropriate content, standards and expectations, relate their own performance to these, and improve subsequent activities. Race (2001) calls this state 'conscious competence'. Moreover, for most UK students in a mass HE system, formal feedback on assignments is almost the only personal guidance they receive. We need to understand how we can maximise the value of these individual encounters, and develop in each student a reflective approach to learning, and a strong desire to succeed.

What do students want?

"If a student was to hand in work that was handwritten in illegible writing you would think this was a poor effort and you would fail them. Please show us the simple courtesy of writing clearly so that we know you can be bothered."

Tutors often remark that students disregard feedback and may only look at the mark awarded. Conversely, students usually suggest that they do value feedback that is well constructed (Weaver, 2006; Yorke, 2003), but that much of it is not. Assessment and feedback are the areas of students' learning experiences which are perennially poorly rated by students according to the UK's National Student Survey. Williams and Kane (2008) have explored the National Student Survey assessment scores in more detail, and provided additional guidance on the elements that tend to improve students' scoring. These include introducing standardised feedback forms, submission and return processes; providing feedback in alternative forms; and using one-to-one tutorials for feedback.

Student Views on Good and Poor Quality Feedback

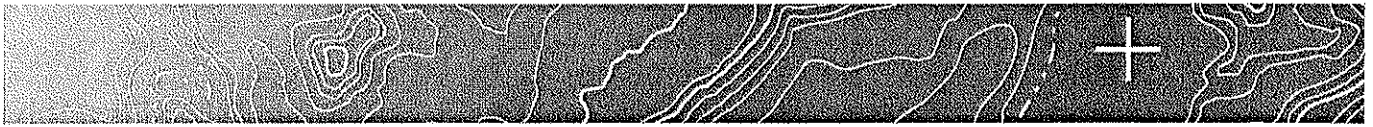
(adapted from the Higher Education Academy, 2006).

Student Views on Good Quality Feedback

- Verbal, face-to-face feedback is particularly useful
- Feedback should be detailed and specific
- Comments should be clear and legible
- Constructive feedback is helpful, including advice on how work may be improved
- Advice and encouragement needs to be given on how to use feedback
- Comments on student work (not on a separate sheet) assist them in identifying and understanding what and where they went wrong

Student Views of Poor Quality Feedback

- Feedback can be too general (e.g. 'good work') and too brief, giving students little idea of what is right and wrong and how to improve
- Vague annotations are unhelpful (e.g. underlining and circling sections of text, without explanation)
- Illegible handwriting
- For exams, often the grade is given without explanation
- Overly negative comments, which can sometimes be derogatory and insulting
- Inconsistencies between tutors as to what makes a good piece of work



Timeliness and value of feedback

To maximise its value, feedback must be provided in a timely way. Race (2001) suggests that a day or two is best, but for many tutors that will be wildly optimistic given their schedules. Institutions often have a 'Student Charter' which guarantees that work will be marked and returned in a particular period of time; typically a month. In fact, a month is a considerable time for a student to wait for feedback, if it is intended to improve their subsequent performance. In four weeks they may have forgotten the details of the assessment criteria, their views on their own performance, or even the totality of the work. This aspect naturally has to be set alongside the multiple demands upon staff time, but consistent Departmental practice on timeliness is advisable to ensure equity.

The language of feedback

Research suggests that students only have limited understandings of staff feedback (e.g. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Weaver, 2006) and that this lack of a shared understanding of academic discourse presents difficulties for them in understanding and using their feedback. Orrell (2006) describes much feedback as being codified in the 'expert' language of the relevant academic discipline. At its most basic, students need to be aware of the meaning of generic words common in academic parlance such as 'critique', 'argument' and 'analysis'. Many are not, according to Weaver (2006), Chanock (2000) and Orrell (2006). When the hugely diverse 'expert' academic discourses of post-modernist human geography, or technical earth science are overlain as well, it is clear that tutors will need to pay particular attention to expressing their feedback unambiguously, avoiding specialist language and opaque vocabulary where possible. Conversely there is the risk of a self-defeating downward spiral of incomprehension, repeated failure and loss of confidence – alienating rather than socialising students.

“The feedback is frank and concise. Credit is given for the effort I made in researching the topic and it also highlights the areas in need of improvement. The comments are objective and supported with additional notes on the script.”

However, the issues go beyond that. Feedback needs to be seen by students as enabling learning, and not just as the identification of a set of weaknesses or a progress check; it needs to affirm student's work by balancing positive and negative elements. Overly critical tutor feedback can easily be misinterpreted as a destructive commentary on a student's innate ability rather than their effort. Weaver has noted that tutors do tend to comment particularly on weaknesses (2006). This will be particularly damaging for

those students with low self-esteem, but the research also suggests that gender and cultural background are relevant. Whereas the more resilient individuals will see feedback as motivational and something on which they can act to improve their performance, those with more fragile dispositions can become defensive or agitated, and feel unable to face up to it (Yorke, 2003).

So what should I say?

Yorke (2003), Mutch (2003) and others have argued that feedback should be seen as a collaboration between tutor and student to achieve the best performance. For a new undergraduate, and particularly in the assessment of items such as field notebooks and laboratory reports, many tutors will focus their feedback on encouragement, evaluating accuracy, identifying gaps in understanding and gently challenging misconceptions. At higher levels, the commentary might be more qualitative, concerned with the structure of the argument and the depth of analysis undertaken. The feedback can be more divergent (Yorke, 2003). It might suggest new ways of exploration, and flag up areas where the research community themselves lack knowledge or experience.

“The feedback is quite negative and does not appear to encourage me to do better.”

Whilst always relating to the intended learning outcomes of the assessment, and to the set assessment criteria, commentary should include a balance of positive and negative points appropriate to the weightings of different criteria. It should highlight areas handled well (including task-related aspects such as time management), diagnose any problems and misunderstandings, identify parts or areas that could be improved and provide guidance on how to address them. It needs to cover general points, and to address any specific areas for focus and improvement.

“The provisional mark is low, although you would not think so by reading the module cover sheet.”

Opinion is divided concerning how to return marks, as opposed to the more general commentary. Some tutors routinely withhold the marks until the student has had an opportunity to read or hear the narrative or to discuss their work with them, on the basis that this will promote more reflection and subsequent improvement. Others ask students to estimate their mark based on the feedback, before revealing it. However such strategies can, potentially, be irritating to students and expensive of staff time.



Engaging students with the process?

Research suggests that in order to improve feedback significantly, it is necessary to better engage students in the assessment process. This may take a number of forms including:

- Enabling a dialogue to take place between staff and students on assessment.
- Involving students in negotiating assessment criteria.
- Making use of peer and self-assessment techniques.

By discussing assessment and feedback with students (expected standards, assignment goals, marking criteria, the language of assessment and feedback, and how to act on feedback), staff expectations can be clarified and student misunderstandings can be cleared up. Staff-student discussion also benefits tutors by revealing to them the aspects of assessment with which students have most difficulty. Student negotiated marking criteria and peer/self-assessment techniques also require the students to think carefully about assessment aims, marking criteria, standards and feedback as they must consider these aspects when reflecting on their own work or that of others (Race and Brown, 2005).

Theoretically powerful, such iterative approaches require time to be set aside for group discussion at an early stage in the courses and modules. Implementation must be structured and supported, particularly where students (and staff) are new to these techniques (e.g. Dochy et al, 1999, Pitts, 2005). It can also be difficult to implement these approaches successfully in the absence of an overall Departmental feedback strategy; isolated attempts are likely to be met with incomprehension and complaint by students.

Some GEES tutors may feel that this level of debate with students is a step too far, too time-consuming and unmanageable to be feasible. However, most are likely to feel that more modest improvements, focussing on the content and delivery mechanisms of their feedback, are sufficient and reasonable. Although perhaps even the most hardened amongst us are likely to balk at the apparently effective but overtly Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' tactics of *'The Apprentice'*.

For advice on various ways in which feedback might be given, please see the companion briefing 'GEES Briefing 2: Modes of Feedback'.

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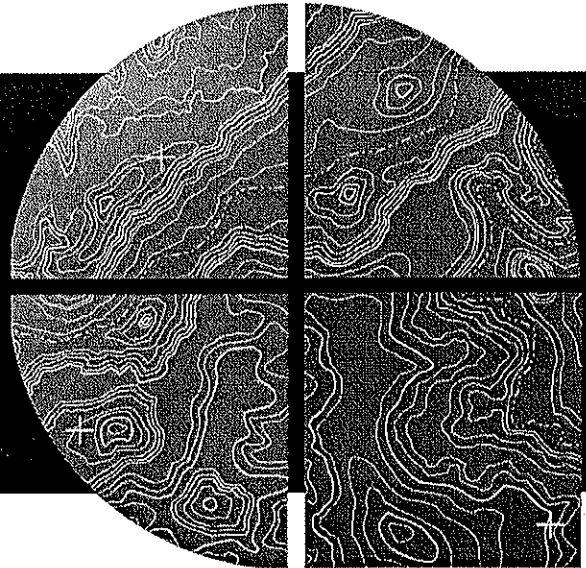
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GEES Briefing 2



Modes of Feedback

'GEES Briefing 1: Giving Feedback' examined the importance of feedback on student learning. It outlined what constitutes good feedback and summarised what students want from the process. It also looked at factors such as the language of feedback and provided tips on how to engage students in productive debate. In this second companion briefing, 'GEES Briefing 2: Modes of Feedback', advice is provided on the various ways in which feedback might be given.

Traditionally feedback is given in a summative written format by the tutor/lecturer and on an individual basis. Typically a cover sheet is used to record the comments, possibly accompanied by some structured tick boxes related to key, generic aspects of the work such as the quality of the written language (spelling, grammar and structure) and the use of relevant literature. Only occasionally does feedback tend to break from this mould. However, there are plenty of other ways of giving feedback which may be more effective in promoting student learning.

This briefing considers some of the options including:

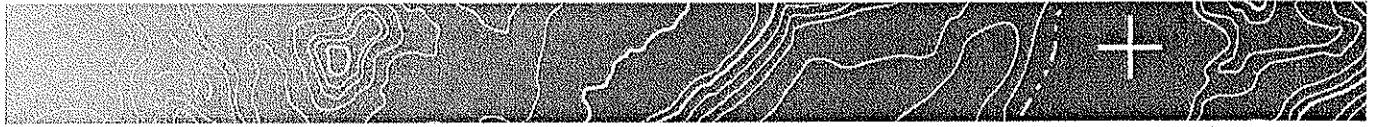
- Giving formative feedback
- Group feedback
- Peer and self-assessment
- Verbal and informal feedback
- Freeform and structured feedback
- Electronic feedback
- Electronic testing with instant feedback



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Professor Carolyn Roberts,
University of Oxford. February 2010

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Formative Feedback

Summative feedback is the judgement on the final outcome of a module or course which certifies the student's performance and to which a mark or grade is attached. Conversely formative feedback is feedback provided to the student at a stage when it can either be used to improve the same piece of work, or to enhance a related later element, usually in the same module or course. It is often informal and is not part of the grading system. We are all familiar with offering summative feedback, but are perhaps less sure of the most effective ways of building formative feedback into our teaching.

Some ideas on ways to give formative feedback:

- providing guidance to students on their field notebooks mid-way through a fieldtrip
- providing a critique of a first draft of an essay, report or dissertation
- offering a multiple-choice assessment in class to allow students to check their progress;
- an employer providing a view on a work placement portfolio
- using 'clickers' or 'electronic voting systems' (or the low-tech version of coloured cards) that enable students to respond to in-class questions, thus providing an instant indication of how much students have understood
- asking students to evaluate their own work at the point of submission, and to offer a commentary on how well they feel they have addressed the learning outcomes.

Generic Group Feedback

Giving generic feedback to the whole class, whether this be face-to-face, written or in electronic form (email, VLE, podcast etc) has a number of advantages and disadvantages. It can take the form of the tutor's opinions on the aspects of performance that have been done well and those that have been done least well. It can also be based around the use of exemplars of good and bad work. Exemplars are thought to be a particularly effective way of conveying key feedback messages.

Advantages:

- Generic feedback can be produced more rapidly - marking just a sample of work will unearth the main strengths and weaknesses.
- Providing in-class generic feedback typically enables students to ask questions about the assessment and feedback. VLEs can also be used to encourage group dialogue about their assessment.

- VLEs and other electronic means can be employed to greater effect to give generic feedback after an examination, when other opportunities are not available (because the unit has ended and there are therefore no more scheduled sessions).

Disadvantages

- Students value and may better 'connect' with individual, personalised feedback
- For students performing at the extreme upper and lower ends of the mark range, generic feedback may be either irrelevant or incomprehensible

A combination of generic feedback and individual feedback where necessary, might be an effective compromise.

Peer and Self Assessment

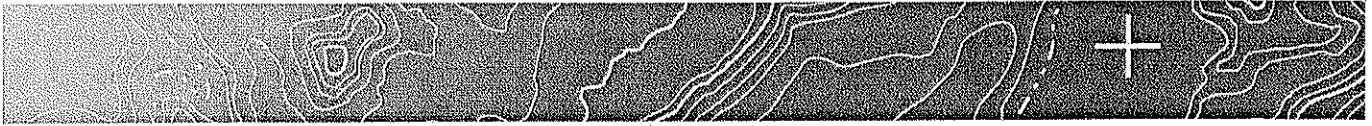
Peer critique, an increasingly advocated technique, can help students to sharpen their ideas and develop a better understanding of assessment criteria and the assessment process. It is argued that peer assessment mimics more closely the process of publication for an academic paper, where referees provide feedback to authors, allowing them to develop their work further.

Tips on peer assessment

- Peer assessment needs to be properly supported (clear guidance, open, non-threatening language), particularly where students may be new to this technique
- Some tutors use 'learning sets', where students share their ideas informally in small groups during the preparation of their assessed work - For GEES students, familiar with group working and the informality of a field class, this will be less radical an experience than for students of some other disciplines
- One of the issues raised by peer assessment strategies is the extent to which the assessed work is then genuinely the student's 'own' work, as opposed to the collective effort of peers. It is therefore important to provide students with clear guidance on expectations

Verbal and Informal Feedback

Most students will identify the written remarks they receive on their work as 'feedback', and will regard it as suitably authoritative and credible. They may be less accustomed to regarding other sources of guidance as feedback. For instance, discussing a student's work with them after a laboratory class, or showing students previously marked assignments or examination papers may not be recognised as a potentially valuable source of advice.



- To ensure that students understand the various possible channels of feedback, it is helpful to be proactive in highlighting these. This will prepare them to take note of all sources of feedback
- It is particularly important to help students recognise all forms of feedback where there are students with diverse and specific educational needs, for instance international students who may be unfamiliar with the relatively informal relationships typical between most students and tutors in the UK, or dyslexic students who require more time to engage with feedback generally
- It is recognised good practice to offer some one-to-one support and verbal feedback to students who wish to take up the opportunity through 'drop in' sessions or 'office hours' even though this is demanding of time
- The disadvantage of verbal feedback is that typically it leaves no permanent legacy for the tutor, student or external examiner, and may be forgotten or disputed later. Verbal feedback can be recorded to accommodate this, and delivered in ways other than in person (see the section on electronic feedback)

'Freeform' or 'structured' feedback?

Most assignments are returned to students with freeform comments. These comments are typically written on cover sheets alongside graded tick boxes on generic aspects of assessment (e.g. on the structure of the assessment).

"In the final sentence the marker states 'for the most part, easy to read' and 'you might consider adopting a more interesting style of writing to engage the reader'. This is very confusing."

Based on a detailed survey of GEES students at the University of Gloucestershire, 'freeform' feedback is more popular with students, provided three key requirements are observed.

1. The writing must be legible and comprehensible. Shorthand symbols such as '!' or '?' in the margins may need some explanation too.
2. Feedback must always provide guidance on how to improve the work, even if high marks are being awarded.
3. The feedback must relate clearly to the mark awarded. This is one of the most common criticisms of external examiners – that the tutors' commentary and the mark awarded are not aligned. So, for instance, a tutor may comment that work is 'excellent', but award a mark in the 60s.

"The handwriting is illegible and reads more like a list of complaints than helpful comment"

Where it is necessary to correct a large number of serious errors, it is particularly important to word the feedback carefully. An entirely negative paragraph may produce such an intense feeling of failure that the guidance on how to improve the work is lost. Whilst the more robust students will regard the feedback as a productive challenge, some will find it difficult to 'survive' adverse feedback, and may withdraw, feeling that they are a failure.

Electronic Feedback

Today's technology means that traditional forms of feedback are being strengthened by electronic systems (e.g. France and Ribchester, 2008; Roberts, 2009). For distance learning students this may be the complete experience of assessment. Electronic feedback encompasses a diversity of forms including written, audio/video and e-testing formats.

Written

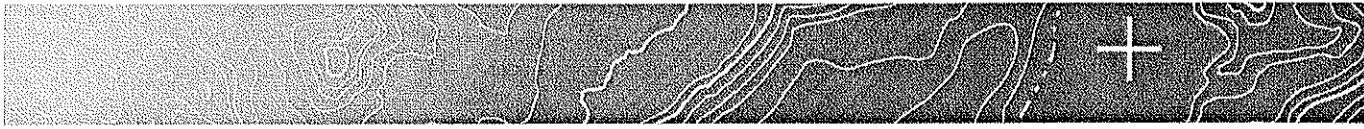
- Electronic feedback is rapid - students can access the commentary as soon as the marking has been completed, and without the need to collect paperwork
- Research by Denton *et al* (2008) suggests that students rate electronic feedback as superior to other responses, particularly because of the associated clarity and legibility
- Research also indicates that assessors require less time to mark each item, at least when using specialist software.
- The disadvantage is that the feedback may become dissociated from the work itself, which is particularly annoying if tutors have also added comments directly onto hard copies of a script or object

Audio / Video Podcasts

- Research suggests that students find podcasting gives very powerful and personal messages about the qualities of their work and recommendations for improvements. This is because verbal feedback has the ability to convey greater nuance in delivery, not apparent in the written word
- With larger classes it is suggested that the time required to assess may be less than for conventional written commentaries
- To get the full benefit, students need to have copies of their piece of work at hand when they listen to the feedback

e-Testing

- There are various electronic testing systems that can be used which are free standing (e.g. Questionmark Perception) or are available as a function of a VLE. These can be used to pose questions from multiple



choice/ true or false, short answer response, through to essay questions

- E-Testing provides instant feedback
- Recent research on testing feedback suggests that students respond favourably to the greater amount of feedback, and even that their performances may be enhanced beyond those of students receiving similar feedback through more traditional means (Bull and Stephens, 1999)
- There are concerns that such systems can appear impersonal and uniform
- Electronic testing provides the greatest benefits for large student cohorts, where the reduced time required in assessing individual scripts, and the level of feedback received by the students will offset the time taken to develop the answer bank. For smaller classes this may not happen unless the same assessment is used repeatedly for successive cohorts

Conclusion

Some of the strategies outlined in this briefing for improving feedback to students are simple, and self-contained. Others are more complex and require deeper adjustments to practice and a re-positioning of attitudes to assessment and feedback by both tutors and students. As Orrell (2006) suggests, feedback needs to shift from being seen as postscript to taking a pivotal place in student learning. Those wishing to enhance the quality of feedback, it is hoped that this briefing provides a few ideas of some of the ways forward.

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