

## Thinking differently about assessment: Why feedback is not enough

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**Abstract.** Too much of contemporary assessment practice is focused on communicating with students. Before they submit their work, we tell them the criteria that will be used for appraising it (with 'standards' and weightings as appropriate). After their work is appraised, we tell them how well they did, and why, so they can learn how to do it better in future. (That's called feedback.) But there's only so much a person can learn purely from being told, as we all know from instruction manuals. This talk outlines an alternative worth thinking about.

Assessment *for* learning is deliberately and purposely formative.

- It *should* make a difference.
- It *should* lead to improvement.

I want to explore with you some conditions for assessment to be formative, and the limited role that feedback can play in this. (It is a fallacy that feedback is *the* critical element! Feedback's potential sufficiency for bringing about improvement is way overrated.)

Common recommendations about the structure of feedback:

- Tell the student on what is good about their work.
- Tell them what's wrong and where.
- Tell them what they could have done to have made it better (past tense) and what they should do next time (future tense).
- Be constructive and supportive throughout.

Feedback as commonly practiced:

- Is often labour intensive;
- Requires a lot of thought to get the wording right; there is often an emotional investment in it;
- Has to be both specific *and* general; and
- Often does not lead to improvement. (What goes wrong?)

The problem is precisely and fundamentally because feedback is mostly about telling.

There are three basic requirements for improvement in an intelligent rather than random way: the learner has to

- Possess a concept of high quality as a goal, or reference level, to be aimed for;
- Compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the reference level (appraisal, judgment); and

- Engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap.

Note that students can monitor the emerging quality of their productions - and make adjustments as necessary - only while they are actually engaged in doing it.

- They must attend to the large scale (how the work is coming together as a whole).
- And they must attend to the small scale (point by point tactical decisions).
- For both of these, learners need to have acquired the relevant skills, know-how, knowledge.

More observations

- These three conditions (goal knowledge, appraising, gap closing) must be satisfied simultaneously rather than as sequential steps.
- The (macro) process of grading involves the first two in that it is essentially comparing a particular case either with a reference level or with one or more other cases.
- Control during production, which is the site where students operate most intensively, is a (micro) process carried out in real time. It involves all three conditions.

Focus now on the goal, the quality being aimed for.

- Quality as a concept is like many other abstract concepts (democracy, religion, integrity, elasticity, energy, family, syndrome, justice, felony, coherence).
- For some simple concepts, such as redness, the exhibition of positive and negative instances (with appropriate labels) may be enough.
- For sophisticated concepts, that is hardly ever enough.

Roller coaster example. How would you convey to a person who has no idea what a roller coaster is what it is like to ride on one? How would convey the curious mixture of acceleration, exhilaration, fear, surprise, sense of 'capture' by the safety features, and lack of control over anything?

- Describing?
- Illustrating?
- Show the person a real one?
- Show the person a number of different roller coasters?

Coming to knowledge about quality requires three elements:

- Description
- Exemplars
- Tacit knowledge (which is partly the background knowledge of how the descriptions apply to the cases, but mostly knowledge of the overall constitutive nature of quality as an abstract, (non-concrete) concept).

Observations

- None of these is expendable.
- All three must connect.
- How well these are incorporated into the learning context is basically under the control of the sender of information (teacher and institution).

How do these depend on the characteristics of the receiver of the information? The development of tacit knowledge is way underplayed.

Conveying fullest message requires [Shared experience] + [Shared language] + [Access to common exemplars]

- Of these it is the common experience, taken literally, that still lags behind the others.

How does the fullest knowledge about what a roller coaster ride is like come about? The person has to board a trolley, buckle up and take a ride!

- Similarly, we have to provide learners with *evaluative experience* of the right type.
- The ride is not only for the experience of having it but also for the purposes of 'calibration', to enable future discourse, judgment and production.

Bringing students into the guild; look at entire works through evaluative eyes.

- Holistic versus criterion-by-criterion.
- Ego-involving versus task involving; inferences about inputs (such as effort) are irrelevant to quality determination and should have no influence on it.
- Judging quality versus design-and-construct. Different domains of expertise. Developing evaluative expertise is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being able to produce quality works consistently.

Where does feedback sit in all of this?

- It is an essential part, but it is never enough. *This is the case regardless of the quality or promptness of feedback.*
- Design of teaching and learning environments must provide for all necessary elements.
- This implies shifting away from the traditional feedback model, and distributing energy and resources across the requirements of description, exemplars and shared experience, with a view to developing sophisticated tacit knowledge.
- To do so raises not only a structural but also a cultural challenge.

Taking up such a challenge would change the way we look at and practice teaching and assessment, and need not be more labour intensive. I commend it to you for consideration

These are notes used for the presentation. For details about the associated full paper, which is in late stages of preparation as a refereed journal article, please email the author [r.sadler@griffith.edu.au](mailto:r.sadler@griffith.edu.au)