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Teacher Feedback

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VIDEO: Nachhaltiges Feedback an Studierende; Silvia Hartung, M.A. , Universität der Bundeswehr München im Kurzinterview (Video in German)

Feedback is an integral part of academic practice, both during informal conversations with colleagues at conferences and as peer review for journal articles or research projects.^[1] Therefore, teachers aim to encourage students early on to actively exercise and internalise **giving and receiving feedback as academic practice**.

Feedback helps students learn, especially if it is **task-specific, improvement-oriented, and delivered in a timely manner**. Feedback should be embedded in a **coherent teaching concept**, should take place in a trusting **environment**, and should foster **active study attitudes and habits**. In the context of university-level teaching, feedback may be given on written or oral exams, written works (including

drafts), exercises, projects, as well as presentations and other oral assignments. It is important to consider the practicability and viability of feedback before implementing it: We recommend different formats and methods depending on class size, assignment, and intended learning outcomes.

Effective feedback is a form of **dialogue**, rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge.^[2] Since learning can never entirely be steered by teachers, this notion also applies to learning processes prompted by feedback.^[3] Yet, the process of constructing and restructuring knowledge among students is stimulated by external feedback. Students actively participate in this process by absorbing and interpreting the feedback they received, relating it to their performance, and processing it with regard to future performance and learning strategies.^[4] For teachers, one significant objective of feedback lies in encouraging **active study attitudes and habits**.

Feedback is an **effective factor influencing successful learning**. The degree to which feedback can be successful, however, depends on its design.^[5] If, for example, the teacher announces before an assignment that it will be subjected to feedback, students tend to spend more time on that task.^[6] On the other hand, some varieties of feedback have little to no influence on learning processes. Extremely critical feedback without any indication on how to improve might even have negative effects on student performance and motivation.^[7] In addition to the feedback design, the effectiveness of feedback hinges on how well it is integrated in subsequent teaching/learning processes. Since feedback does not occur in isolation, its success depends on a myriad of factors, such as the clarity of course objectives, as well as the general environment and atmosphere of the class.^[8]

1. Quality Features and Requirements of Feedback

1.1. *The appropriate feedback at the right moment*

Requirement for teachers: Teaching concepts for courses with continuous assessment include reasons for choosing learning activities that will receive feedback as well as considerations about appropriate timing over the course of the semester.

As you design your course (or exam), include feedback as an **integral component of your teaching concept**. Inform your students about opportunities for feedback before or at the beginning of your course. When planning your course, remember that **not all student work requires feedback**, nor would it be possible due to time constraints. Once comprehended and mastered, academic activities and procedures need little to no explicit external feedback.^[9]

It is easier and more effective for teachers to implement **targeted feedback on central, selected assignments**. Teachers are encouraged to identify for which learning activities feedback is truly useful, and when (i.e. during which phase of the semester) to use it. The **choice of learning activities on which to give feedback** depends on course type (continuous assessment, non-continuous assessment) and intended learning outcomes.

Improvement-oriented feedback on **formative assignments** in courses with continuous assessment has the potential to be particularly constructive for subsequent work and assignments. This requires the teacher to appropriately sequence individual assignments over the course of the semester. Students also benefit from constructive feedback on **summative performances** at the end of the course, for example when students view their exam results. In this case, feedback allows students to understand better both the assessment and the criteria it is based on. Teachers can also use feedback to give students advice that goes beyond the course, e.g. concerning further studies or future professional activities.

The **appropriate timing of feedback** in the course design is crucial. This makes it possible to realise feedback's full potential in the learning process. What **timing is appropriate** depends largely on the learning activity to receive feedback. If learning pertains to acquiring knowledge, constructive feedback should be delivered as soon as possible, perhaps even immediately, for example as automated feedback on online quizzes or as oral feedback (e.g. correcting incorrect usage of scientific terminology). First-year students generally find immediate feedback especially helpful. At higher competency levels or more independent work on complex tasks, immediate feedback is less important. The more independent and complex students' performances, the more comprehensive feedback is needed that meets their desires for recognition of their performance and quality of their work.^[10]

1.2. Students understand the intended learning outcomes and recognise their significance

Requirement for teachers: Teachers have clear intended learning outcomes in mind and strive – as best as possible – to communicate and discuss them with their students.

Feedback is closely linked to transparent performance requirements. Teachers should have clear ideas of their course objectives and intended student learning outcomes when they plan the course. Communicating these prior to each assignment makes it easier for students to recognise where they stand and what potentials they can realise.^[11]

Furthermore, students' intentions to learn are significant for the feedback process. Ideally, students share the anticipated learning outcomes and consider them useful.^[12] If class size and the context, in which teaching and learning occurs, allow, teachers may choose not to merely introduce the intended learning outcomes, but discuss with students the reasons why it is worthwhile to pursue these learning processes.

1.3. Improvement-orientated feedback is challenging without being overwhelming

Requirement for teachers: Teachers have insight into their students' learning levels and vary their feedback accordingly. Thus, students are challenged without being overwhelmed.

Students' understanding of the intended learning outcomes can be especially productive for feedback when it is more than simply a diagnostic tool. If the conditions allow, improvement-oriented feedback should include information on how students can gradually close the gap between where they currently stand and their learning outcomes.^[13] Research shows that students prefer feedback on progress to corrective feedback.^[14] In courses with continuous assessment, this type of improvement-oriented feedback that includes concrete suggestions for courses of action, explanations, or examples, can support students in applying to subsequent assignments what they have learned from the feedback they received.

Suggestions for improvement strengthen students' **academic self-efficacy**, i.e. students' expectations that they can achieve the learning outcomes and perform well in their courses. Thus, students rely less on the belief that learning their course material is solely dependent on unchangeable factors such as intelligence. As a consequence, they are more motivated to take responsibility for their own learning.^[15] Motivated students bring greater joy to shared intellectual and discovery processes, and a higher degree of readiness to engage thoroughly with topics.^[16]

Improvement-orientated feedback requires teachers to know, or at least to gauge realistically, their students' **current levels of learning**. Depending on class size and setting, you can use various methods to assess your students' learning, both at the beginning of the course and as the semester continues. In smaller groups, teachers are also able to find out students' **working and learning strategies**, and take these into consideration when giving feedback on how to proceed.

Finding out students' learning progress allows teachers to choose **feedback appropriate to their students' levels of intellectual development**. Feedback is especially useful when it **motivates without being overwhelming**. Students are more likely to act on feedback when they are able to work on demanding goals than when they don't feel challenged.^[17] However, feedback always carries the risk of overwhelming students.^[18] Teachers can minimize this risk by making sure that their feedback is not too detailed.^[19] For example, overly specific grading rubrics may give the wrong impression that writing academic texts means working through a series of independent steps rather than taking on a holistic process.^[20] Prioritising your suggestions for improvement supports students in developing concrete ideas about the next steps in their learning development.^[21]

1.4. Feedback promotes independent (continuous) learning

Requirement for teachers: Feedback includes concrete ideas for changes and optimised learning strategies in order to bolster active study attitudes and habits.

Teachers can support their students in building competences to understand and interpret feedback correctly. This promotes students' **capacity for self-evaluation and independent (continuous) learning**^[22], which may be a central concern of feedback in courses with a focus on guided learning processes. Successful learning requires meta-cognitive reflection, including self-monitoring, self-

evaluation, and appropriate strategies for action.^[23] The competency for (self) evaluation is a prerequisite for autonomous (continuous) student learning,^[24] and can be practised by working with teacher feedback as well as peer feedback.

Depending on the class setting, teachers have various **possibilities** to support students in using formative feedback to continue independent learning and adapt it if necessary in order to reach the intended learning outcomes. For example, teachers can design feedback that students **comment on, evaluate and/or discuss among themselves**. In the case of multi-stage projects or complex tasks such as term papers, students can and should immediately implement the feedback, as they continue working on the assignment.^[25] For more information, see "Teacher Feedback on Writing Assignments".

1.5. Acceptable feedback is based on trust and a culture where making mistakes is tolerated

Requirement for teachers: Teachers should actively promote a positive working environment early on, and let their students know that errors are a welcomed opportunity for development.

While it is important that students are able to interpret feedback they receive from teachers, as a necessary first step they need to be willing to accept it and reflect upon it. Within the feedback process, which is **based on relationships**, this willingness is linked to emotions, which significantly influence how students and teachers ask for, formulate, and receive feedback. Acceptable feedback should always be formulated respectfully, but this should not mean only praising students. Teachers should articulate very clearly the opportunities for future improvement in addition to pointing out elements that work well. Frequent (especially personal) praise leads students to believe that their teacher simply tends to praise, while they tend to not link this praise to their own performances.^[26] Furthermore, teachers who fear the anticipated student reactions, may sometimes use overly careful formulations that dilute the feedback message. If teachers employ dialogical feedback processes and trust-building communication, they can make it easier for students to accept feedback.^[27]

Trust is an important prerequisite for people to be open to feedback and take it seriously, rather than assuming a defensive attitude.^[28] In their courses, students should encounter teachers who listen with interest and establish an environment of trusting communication. They should experience competent, honest, and sympathetic instructors. A positive working environment free of fear encourages students to share their thoughts and ideas, even if these are not yet fully formed or if students fear that they have misunderstood something. Particularly in courses with continuous assessment, students should have the opportunity to regularly ask questions and share their concerns without fearing any negative consequences (i.e. through grades). According to **error management training**,^[29] students experiment with various solutions and make errors in order to learn from them. Obstacles, cognitive insecurities, and inconsistencies are thus not hidden, but treated as normal elements of the learning process.^[30]


Additional Resources

Giving and receiving (peer)feedback

(<https://infopool.univie.ac.at/videos/giving-and-receiving-peer-feedback/>)

Video series featuring Mag. Dr. Armin Berger, MA and Mag. Dr. Helen Heaney, BA

Recipients of the UNIVIE Teaching Award 2017

 Nachhaltiges Feedback an Studierende; Silvia Hartung, M.A., Universität der Bundeswehr München im Kurzinterview (Video in German)

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