

Making feedback to students more effective without increasing staff workload

*School of Geography Working Group on Student Writing, Feedback and Assessment
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Key goals:

- **to maintain the amount and diversity of assessed written work at levels appropriate to modules' learning outcomes**
- **to improve the timeliness of feedback to students**
- **to improve the effectiveness of feedback to students**
- **to achieve the above with an overall reduction, not increase, in staff workload**

Suggestions

Many of the suggestions outlined below are based on examples of tried-and-tested practice supplied by School of Geography staff, others are ideas arising from the April 2010 awayday sessions. They are presented here in no particular order and there are varying degrees of overlap between them. Everyone is encouraged to consider adopting or adapting some of these suggestions for the modules on which they teach. However, it should be stressed that there is no expectation that all of them should be adopted, or indeed that all module convenors should adopt any of them; even if only some of the ideas are employed in only some modules, then an overall improvement in the effectiveness of our feedback to students should result.

Recognition of feedback

We already give a lot of feedback but students do not always recognise it as such. Students are often more concerned with "grade accountancy" than with the feedback comments that staff have carefully and laboriously provided. There is also a finer distinction that should perhaps be anticipated and if possible pre-empted: students will often respond well to feedback that corrects errors, but are less interested in advisory feedback about style and content (which requires more work on their part).

- Require students to include (with their final submissions) written responses to feedback received on drafts or outlines.
- Separate grades from feedback; for example, provide critical feedback on a draft of the work with, say, up to three suggestions for key improvements, which the student must then address before submitting the final version for grading. Feedback provided with the final grade can be limited to brief comments on overall quality and adequacy of responses to feedback on the draft.
- Remind them to take notes when you are giving oral feedback to individuals or a class.
- Schedule overt feedback sessions into the module timetable.
- Disabuse them of the expectation that if they submit a draft for feedback its shortcomings will all be "fixed" for them. Feedback should indicate how the work can be improved, but it is up to the student to make the improvements.

Feedback dates

- Publish feedback dates along with submission deadlines in the module documentation issued to students at the start of the module. This ensures that students know what to expect – how and when they will receive feedback – and helps the assessor with regard to both commitment and planning.
- Including a list of assignment-specific assessment criteria in the instructions is also helpful in this respect.

Keeping assignments within the span of the module

Having an assignment submitted right at the end of a module often leads to problems, such as difficulty in finding time to complete the marking, or lateness in returning grades and feedback.

- Schedule a final submission for, say Week 10, to allow time for assessment to be completed and returned in Week 12.

Setting coursework assignments early

In order to provide feedback early enough to influence final outcome it is necessary to set assignments early. A couple of examples are given below.

- Brief the students on the nature of a coursework assignment (e.g. an essay) in Week 1, issuing them with a list of suggested topic areas, with the requirement that they come back in Week 2 having done some reading and able to choose a topic (or propose their own if that is allowable); in Week 3 they could submit a one-page outline for approval (oral or written feedback) and after that they have to work on it and submit by the final deadline (say in Week 10), with final grades and written feedback being returned to them in Week 12.
- Set a short coursework assignment in Week 1 or 2 which must be submitted for assessment in Week 4; grades and written feedback will be returned in Week 6, in time for responses to that feedback to result in improved performance on a second assignment (similar, or perhaps longer) set in Week 6 and submitted in Week 10 (with return of grades and feedback in Week 12).

Such interventions may be time-consuming but to some extent they can be incorporated into the scheduled sessions for the module; giving such guidance develops staff familiarity with the work which can reduce time spent marking the final submission.

Feed-forward

Issuing written instructions to students setting out the requirements for a coursework assignment is always a good idea.

- Include in the instructions some indications of common mistakes that can be avoided and suggestions for good organisation and practice. Anticipating errors and shortcomings in this way (not so much “heading them off at the pass” as “pointing them towards the pass”) reduces the need for repetitive writing of feedback comments on drafts or final versions of work submitted by many students falling into the same traps of omission and misunderstanding.

Assessment and feedback workshops and clinics

- Devote a timetabled session to a clinic in which students bring and discuss drafts of a coursework assignment work, trouble-shooting problems and receiving oral feedback.
- Devote a timetabled session to a workshop in which students discuss and develop responses to feedback already received (e.g. a draft just returned with written feedback).

Early feedback

Feedback supplied early enough to influence the quality of remaining coursework on the same module is effective feedback. There are at least three ways of doing this.

- Where there are two or more coursework assignments, make sure that the first is completed, submitted and returned with feedback within the first six weeks of the module (or at least before significant work has started on the remaining coursework assignments).
- Split one assignment into two components, with the first being short, simple and designed to facilitate the provision of steering feedback that will help students with the rest of the assignment. For example, require the students to submit a one-page outline plus a minimum of five relevant references or give students a choice of essay topic but with their chosen topic formally approved by the module convenor following submission of a one-page outline.
- Split one assignment into two components, the first being a draft submitted for feedback one or two weeks before the final submission deadline, the second being the final submission for formal assessment.

The initial assignments do not need to be formally graded but it is useful to make them formal requirements for completion of the course.

Seminar presentations

- Short presentations on coursework assignment (e.g. essay) topics can provide an effective opportunity for immediate feedback, whether or not the presentations themselves are assessed.
- The amount of time that presentations take up can be problematic for large classes.

Hold regular seminar preparation, discussion and feedback

- Devote a regular timetabled slot on a module (say 30 minutes every second week) to a class discussion of a paper (set the previous week), to encourage students to read relevant literature and develop their understanding of a topic.
- Select students to give short presentations, and conclude with a summary and feedback given orally by the lecturer.

Peer-review of drafts

- Devote a timetabled session to a peer-review workshop in which students are guided through reviewing drafts of each other's work, either individually or in groups.

Group writing exercises

Consider making an item of assessed coursework a group writing exercise rather than an individual one.

- Group writing is a good way of getting students to give feedback to each other; ensure that they realise this is happening.
- Group-written coursework can reduce dramatically the final marking workload (e.g. five reports from four groups of five students, as opposed to twenty individual reports), this freeing up staff time for giving, e.g., earlier feedback on drafts.
- Giving feedback to small groups is less time-consuming for staff than giving it individuals.
- Assessing group work fairly has its problems; to some extent these can be overcome by scheduling steering meetings with the groups, so as to maintain an awareness of how they are progressing (instead of just seeing the final result) – such meetings also provide opportunities for immediate feedback. Alternatively / additionally require each student to submit, separately, brief written comments on their own and others' contributions to their group's work.

Standardised feedback sheets

Feedback sheets such as those used for first year tutorial essays (with a printed selection of comments that can be circled as appropriate) can be effective in ensuring that all students get similar levels of feedback while avoiding the need for the marker to write similar comments over and over on multiple essays. There is a danger, however, that such feedback may be seen as mechanical and ineffective.

- Always write some additional feedback comments specific to the individual item of coursework .
- The tutorial essay feedback sheet is designed for use with both a draft and a final submission. If using such a sheet to provide feedback on a draft, write up to three suggestions for improvements that should be made before final submission.
- Require students to supply written responses to feedback (e.g., what they actually did in response to feedback on a draft, before submitting the final version for assessment); provide a space for this so that the feedback sheet becomes a record of the whole process.
- It takes time to provide feedback on a draft, but it takes less time to mark the final submission if you have already seen a draft and if it is accompanied by a statement of responses to feedback on the draft.

Feedback hours

- Designate one of your office hours a “feedback hour” and let your students know that they may (or should) come to you to have written feedback explained, or to discuss possible responses to feedback received.

Effective use of Blackboard

Some staff use Blackboard to provide either marks only (e.g. for an on-line test) or marks and feedback comments. Blackboard could be used in more creative ways; a couple of examples are given below.

- Use it to facilitate the posting of individual students’ questions and comments so that responses (= feedback) can be seen by all students taking the module (thus saving time that might be spent making the same responses to several students).
- Have students submit short (e.g. one side of A4) reviews of papers they have read, selected from supplied reading lists, knowing that one of these (out of, say six submitted during the module) will be selected for formal assessment. The module convenor can then easily read a selection of earlier submissions and post general feedback comments for all to read on Blackboard, aimed at improving subsequent work (along the lines of “some of you are doing ...well, some of you are failing to...”). Only one of the submitted reviews needs to be assessed formally, but a proportion of the marks could be deducted for non-submission of reviews (say 5% off for every missing item)

Quick quizzes and 60-second essays

Short tests and/or writing exercises can be an effective way of engaging students’ attention and making them evaluate their own understanding (“auto-feedback”). They may reduce the time available for delivering lecture content but this should be compensated for by improvements in learning, coursework and exam technique.

- Devote the last ten minutes of a class to a quick quiz designed to test knowledge and understanding gained in that session: five minutes for the quiz and five minutes to read out answers (students can mark their own or each others). Used regularly this can be a very effective way of providing immediate feedback and encouraging students to pay attention. Make sure they understand that the exercise is designed to provide feedback!
- As above, but do it at the start of a class, testing on the previous week’s topic.
- During a class, ask students to write an answer to a question in 60 seconds; collect them in, read them and return them with collective feedback to the whole class the following week (time consuming but effective), or get them to swap answers and provide each other with feedback during the class (less time consuming but more difficult for the lecturer to judge the effectiveness of the exercise). The first time this may be quite chaotic, but if used at regular intervals (say three or four times in a semester) the students learn what is expected and results may improve.

Use examples of real-life feedback

Students may recognise feedback more easily and take it more seriously if they realise that giving, receiving and responding to feedback is a common activity in professional life. They need to appreciate that understanding and responding to feedback is both a skill and a responsibility.

- To help them understand the nature of feedback and appreciate that we all have to deal with it, give students copies of one of your own papers as submitted to a journal, together with the feedback you received from reviewers and/or the editor. Ask them to consider how fair and appropriate they think the reviews are, how clearly the reviewers have articulated their criticisms, and whether positive as well as negative views are expressed. Ask them how they would respond. Tell them your views and how you responded, and what the final outcome was; perhaps give them a copy of the published paper to compare with the originally submitted version. This could work well with a tutor group, or with a larger class divided into small discussion groups.
- This exercise takes time, but with the right choice of paper (i.e., relevant to the topic being taught) this need not mean time lost in terms of teaching “content”.

Feedback on language

Staff should not be expected to proof-read students’ written work, correcting all errors. Students need to be taught how to do this, and to accept responsibility for doing it.

- Do indicate at least some necessary corrections to style, grammar, spelling, punctuation. Make it clear that these are just examples of the kind of errors that the student is expected to identify and correct for themselves in future.
- If the standard of writing is poor, select one or two short sections as examples and show how they might be re-written; don’t rewrite the essay for them. Advise the student to apply the lessons learned to future work.
- Make students aware that you will penalise repeated errors, i.e. the type of errors you already drew their attention to in a previous submission. Make a point of doing so.

Using “Track Changes”

To be effective, written feedback must be legible. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of the handwritten feedback supplied to the Working Group by colleagues during the departmental awayday proved difficult to decipher! If your students cannot read your feedback comments easily then you may be wasting your time writing them.

- An alternative to hard-copy marking is to read and mark the electronic version on your pc or laptop, using the “Track Changes” facility in Word to add feedback comments to the text; once you are in the habit it takes no more time than the handwritten method and it has the advantage that your comments are always legible and can be edited. Comments added where appropriate can be copied and pasted into a summary feedback sheet. Where feedback on a draft is required, the electronic versions can be sent by and to students as email attachments. It is easy to keep a copy of the draft, with your feedback comments, for subsequent comparison with the final version. Students who have experienced this kind of feedback provision have commented favourably on it. Some staff say they have tried it and it takes too long; others say it takes no longer than handwritten marking and feedback.