# Feedback for Learning

A trainer should be able to help people learn deeply enough to become independently capable of acting and learning more. This usually happens only when learners use information or apply skills presented or demonstrated. This use and application can take the form of learning activities, questions, and collaborative tasks, but learning happens especially when trainers or peers provide feedback.

The reason for this is that feedback is not just a collection of comments about the learner's performance. Effective feedback is a process in which learners need to make sense of information about their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or achievement of learning. Comments given by a trainer are part of the process, and need to be constructed so that they can be easily understood and used by the learner. Feedback allows past performance to inform future activity. In this sense, **feedback** needs to be a way to **feedforward**.

Not only trainer feedback, but peer, self and automated systems of feedback are well recognised as effective modes too. The key element of effective feedback (in any mode) is the ability for learners to use performance related comments in order to improve in a subsequent task. For the feedback process to be successful, it is therefore critical that educators consider what learners will do with the feedback comments, and how usable they are. This necessarily requires that educator-provided feedback comments are clearly interpretable by the learner, and provided in time to be used on a subsequent task.

## Some key elements of effective feedback

- **Feedback information needs to be actionable**

  Feedback comments need to provide some insight into what the learner can usefully improve. For this reason, it is most likely that specificity and detail in feedback comments will be more useful than generic praise or criticism.

- **Teaching by example**

  Incorporating concrete examples drawn from the learner's work for both positive and critical comments allows opportunity to personalise the feedback.

- **Learners need to be able to make sense of the information**

  This point has two implications. First, it means that the educator-provided information needs to be created in a way that is most likely to be readily understood by the learner. Second, it means that learners may need additional support, resources or explicit teaching in order to gain the skills and knowledge to make sense of the information. For example, alongside the feedback comments, the trainer may need to provide additional resources that explain key ideas, examples, or study guides.

- **Feedback comments need to be both forward and backward looking**

  Feedback comments should look back at how the learner performed in their previous assignment, as well as looking forward to what they could most usefully improve as they face their next hurdles.

- **Feedback comments need to be provided at a time that learners are best able to use them**

  Some research has shown that negative feedback given immediately after a complex task with no new opportunities to try again can be discouraging. It can be best to give such feedback immediately before the next opportunity for the learner to perform the task.

- **The timing of feedback comments may need to be anchored to a subsequent related task**

  Feedback comments should be received before the next assignment is due. This element of the feedback design, when linked with in-class activities, can maximise the impact of forward-looking feedback on learners' preparation for the next assessment.

Based on the above, one can note that effective feedback requires trainers to assess the qualities of learner performance, and to craft information and responses to have a positive impact. In addition, we have to keep in mind that learners possess a broad range of experiences of education, and their feelings about their studies may have been forged by the extent to which they were engaged, motivated and included in learning processes at school, college, university and in their working environment. For some students, assessment in particular, invokes the fear of being judged a failure and the associated feelings of possible humiliation. In addition to the past experiences of study, the learner's stage of development can also influence how they respond to and interpret the feedback provided.

A healthy trainer–learner relationship is of crucial importance if we are to be able to support our learners in dealing with any fears they may have in taking the risk of making mistakes. The individuality of learners should also be taken into account. Some learners may perceive trainers as an authoritative or even threatening figure, and may find that they do not possess the confidence to make contact, or even ask for clarifications. But there are some qualities and skills in a trainers' practice that can really help when supporting learners through the provision of feedback. Successful support to learners is most often observed when trainers are:

Non-judgemental (outside the formal assessment system, of course) and able to find ways of expressing your views without being critical of someone directly. In other words, it is important to be able to criticise someone's approach to a learning exercise, for example, without criticising them personally.

Empathic - especially able to understand how people from different backgrounds to your own might feel about being a learner.

Approachable - In other words, trainers should be friendly when contacted by learners and when contacting them. There should be no real sense of hierarchy in adult training.

Able to listen constructively, helping students to clarify their concerns without interrupting unnecessarily or taking over the whole conversation.

Open and accepting of other people's values and ways of thinking.

Honest about what you (as trainer) can and cannot do to help, or know and do not know about the subject; besides of course, being sufficiently prepared so that students can have confidence of you and your knowledge of the subject.

The application of 'Positive psychology' in education is also proving really promising as a way to develop learning feedback and a learner's motivation to act upon it. Generally, 'Positive psychology' focuses on people's strengths and their reasons to be content. There are quite a few things we trainers could do to use 'Positive psychology' to support students. For example:

- Emphasise the positive during initial contact (especially when providing feedback);
- Try to identify a student's underlying values, goals and motivation;
- Draw out their past successes and high-point moments, especially those that have to do with learning;
- Focus on their existing assets and competencies;
- Identify their resources, and especially their protective factors such as support from family, friends and employers;
- Validate effort rather than only achievement;
- ONLY THEN, talk about uncertainties, mistakes, lack of skills.

This will look like a tall order, but in practice these interactions overlap with each other and it is the general approach of emphasising students' strengths and abilities that are important. The essential key is to emphasise that effort is more important than basic intelligence. It is widely accepted amongst psychologists that: **'People often overestimate the importance of intellectual ability. Practice and perseverance contribute more to accomplishment than being smart does'**. (Hoppe and Stojanovic, 2008[*])

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[*] Hoppe, C. and Stojanovic, J. (2008) 'High aptitude minds', *Scientific American Mind*, vol. 19, no. 4, p. 28.

Finally, we leave you with the thought that constructing effective feedback requires consideration of various aspects, including subject matter expertise and the ability to communicate clearly and with empathy. Every educator should engage in feedback practices with an open and inquisitive mind, prepared for continuous development of their own practices.