Feedback and Students' Learning

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ABSTRACT
This position paper explored the import of effective feedback in the teaching and learning process. Among others, it has shown that effective feedback enables students identify gaps in their learning and provides suggestions to improve their learning; creates responsive learners; sharpens teaching strategies; provides constructive information for both students and teachers; motives students to learn; and many more. Tips on giving effective feedback were also provided which include the need for teachers to be sensitive to the needs of students; provide timely feedback devoid of attack on the personality of students; ensure feedback is dynamic and interactive; make it possible for students to attend to provided feedback rather than putting all their attention on the grades or scores. It was recommended that the exploits of this paper be followed to enable teachers provide effective feedback which will optimally benefit both teachers and students.
Keywords: Effective feedback, improved learning, interaction, pedagogy, academic performance, timeliness.

INTRODUCTION
Feedback is an essential part of education and training programmes. It helps learners to maximise their potentials at different stages of training, raise their awareness of strengths and areas of improvement and identify actions to be taken to improve performance. Feedback is about giving information in a way that encourages the recipient to accept it, reflect on it, learn from it, use it, and hopefully make changes for the better. Feedback is a very important aspect of the teaching-learning environment. It enhances the integration of knowledge, skills and behaviours of teachers and learners in the classroom. Feedback is central to the development of competence and confidence of both teachers and learners at all stages of education. It clarifies good performance, helps in the development of self-assessment and delivery of high quality information to teachers (to improve teaching) and learners (to enhance learning). It is a means of dialogue (written and verbal) between the teacher and the learner which encourages motivational belief and self-esteem, and provides opportunities to close the gap between what is expected to be learned and what is actually learned. Unfortunately, many students ignore written feedback and only consider their grades. The grades are quite important, but ignoring the written feedback (and indeed all other forms of feedback) deprives students of vital opportunities for action and improvement of learning.

An essential to learning and to sound assessment practices, feedback allows students not only to understand how they performed on the assessment task and justification for their grades, but also and very importantly, it provides guidance for students to build their capacity as learners. According to Brown (2007), feedback is the oil that lubricates the cogs of understanding. As Nichol (2007) stated, feedback targets how students learn to monitor, manage and take responsibility for their own learning. Feedback is not simply the correction of errors, awarding of

marks/grades, but also the guide for the improvement of learning. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) claimed that feedback can correct errors, develop understanding through explanations, generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks, promote the development of generic skills by focusing on evidence of the use of skills rather than on the content, promote meta-cognition by encouraging students' reflection and awareness of learning processes involved in the assignment and encourage students to continue studying.

Feedback exists in all processes, activities, and information that enhance learning. It provides the opportunity for learners to reflect on their marks and understand their strengths as well as identify areas requiring improvement. Feedback can take many forms: written form of feedback where learners' responses are marked with comments to improve learning; oral form of feedback where teachers provide verbal feedback before, during and after classroom sessions and assignments, seminars, discussions, and consultations; mail form of feedback where teachers provide feedback on assignments by email or other network facilitated means; and self- or peer- form of feedback where feedback is provided by self and peers talking through their ideas on class discussions, assignments and other experiences. Feedback is the moment in the learning process when students get the most personalized instruction possible, when the knowledge of what has improved and strategies provided for further improvement, what educators say and how they say them deeply influence the progress of students and pedagogy of teachers. Brookhart (2008) found that effective feedback enhances learning and development in both givers and the receivers of feedback. Effective feedback should be accessible and useful to students in enhancing the understanding of their studies and improving of their future performances.

It must be emphasised that not all feedback is useful. In fact, sometimes feedback could be retrogressive and hamper students' learning. What this paper advocates is effective feedback which, according to Gibbs and Simpson (2004), Race (2010), and Race and Pickford (2007), is dynamic, behaviour specific, timely, interactive, constructive (must enhance future learning) and must be attended to. Effective feedback should also recognise both verbal and non-verbal cues.

Feedback is dynamic when it is given regularly and it is appropriate to the learners' expected level of skill and knowledge. It is very pertinent to emphasise that effective feedback must be sufficient both in regularity and details. Students should not be given large chunks of feedback once in a while. Rather feedback should be provided often and in details that are optimum (enough to meet the needs of the learners given the content studied). In other words, for feedback to be effective and useful, it should be regular, and in relatively small chunks of course content. One piece of detailed feedback on an extended essay or task after ten weeks of study is unlikely to support learning. Also a comment such as "a satisfactory attempt" or "a poor attempt", or "a weak report", or "put in more effort", or "this is unacceptable" cannot in any way improve students' learning. The teacher should say what is lacking in students' responses and suggest ways of improvement. Feedback needs to be sensitive to what is to be improved and how to improve it.

When feedback makes comments on students rather than students' work and performance, such feedback is not only reckless but grossly damaging. It is very important that feedback is given about the specific observed behaviour on what is being learned rather than about the person and other matters not related to the instructional objective. Feedback should specify where the student went wrong and what should be done to improve on the student's learning. Feedback should discuss students' performance on the content of their learning and not students' personality and characteristics. It should ensure the current learning is referred to (and not some distant learned or to be learned materials). Negatively or sarcastically comparing students with others and making remarks outside of students' learning and performance will not only discourage students but will also injure their beliefs and values. Words like unprofessional, irresponsible, always, never, stupid, incompetent, and such others must be avoided. In unambiguous terms, feedback should be about students' current learning, performance, and what to do to improve learning, rather than students' characteristics which could hurt their ego and

encourage failure. As Wootton (2002) remarked, feedback should encourage learning and not measure failure.

For feedback to enhance learning, it must be timeous. Put differently, feedback should be timely for it to be effective. Timeliness of feedback necessitates that feedback is given close to the time of observation rather than later when connection can hardly be made between what was being learned and the needed feedback. In other words, students should receive feedback in good time to have it influence their learning. Feedback received several weeks or months after the particular learning content has been completed will be irrelevant and cannot impact on students' learning. Students need to receive feedback when there is still time to apply it towards the relevant instructional objective or skill being learned. Put in another way, feedback is most effective when students are still engaged in the subject matter for which feedback is provided. For instance, tests, assignments and homework should be scored with relevant comments and returned promptly to be used to improve learning.

Effective feedback should be interactive, involving dialogue between teachers and learners (which could be written or verbal). By encouraging students to provide the answers (as opposed to simply giving the answers to them), students get involved in feedback and easily own up their mistakes which often are discovered by them. Providing students with regular opportunities to give and receive feedback enriches their learning experiences in powerful ways. By giving students the responsibility to share their expertise with the teacher and one another, students engage in the highest level of learning which is teaching. This mode of teaching and learning also naturally differentiates learning because each student brings his own perspective, ideas, and preferences. Students see firsthand what their errors are, and that there is no single "right" way to learn or teach. When feedback sessions are interactive, students achieve higher recall rates generally associated with "self-discovery" of the answers, rather than simply being presented with the answers. The outcome is improved learning and better academic performance.

Interactive feedback also involves active listening. Active listening is a valuable attribute for both the provider and receiver of feedback, as it helps to promote effective two-way dialogue. Active listening involves maintaining good eye contact, maintaining an open body posture, using clarifying questions and summarising the points discussed. Feedback is a great gift to the recipient – it offers the recipient the opportunity to improve, grow and feel cared about and valued. It must be emphasised however, that feedback will be most beneficial to the recipient if he is attentive to the feedback being given, and receptive to new ideas and perspectives.

When feedback is effective, it is attended to. Successful students use both marks and feedback and actively self-assess, both to learn and to direct their future studying (Brookhart, 2008). But often students receive feedback on test or assignment scripts, glance through them and put them away without any effort to put the feedback to use. Some test and assignment scripts are even trashed without students looking at the comments in them. Thus, it should be stressed that for feedback to be effective, feedback must be received and attended to. Reynolds (2013) suggested some steps to be followed to ensure that students receive feedback and attend to it:

1. Students should be required to specify on what they would like feedback on.
2. Teachers should provide feedback without marks so that students can read the feedback and get some ideas on how to improve their learning.
3. Teachers should provide avenues for students' assignments to be self-assessed and peer-assessed before the assignments can be submitted to the teacher for scoring. This will enable students compare their reviews with the teacher's reviews.
4. Teachers should provide grades only after students' self-assessment, peer-assessment, and teacher feedback have been completed.

Feedback is constructive when it goes beyond pointing at mistakes of learners to providing solutions for areas of weaknesses and suggesting improvement in future learning. Feedback

should enhance future learning. When feedback corrects current learning without influencing future learning, then such feedback can hardly lead to any meaningful change in behaviour (learning). In other words, feedback may accurately correct errors of the present but still lead to no change in the way a student goes about the next assignment or tackles any future learning task. This is not effective feedback and may occur when feedback comes late and not acted on by students; feedback is backward-looking (addressing materials studied in the past and will not be studied again in the future); and feedback is unspecific. Therefore, for feedback to be effective, it must address current learning and be able to enhance future learning.

Effective feedback must recognise non-verbal cues. The teacher should be aware of non-verbal behaviours that the student might exhibit, such as nervousness, fear, anger, withdrawal, and many more. Non-verbal behaviours might come from the teacher too. Thus, when giving feedback it is important that the teacher is aware of both his own non-verbal behaviours and those of the students that could send negative cues to the feedback recipient. The teacher must avoid giving feedback when either he, or the student, or both of them are in a state of emotional stress.

When engaging students in effective feedback practices, the teacher should draw from the following tips provided by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Race (2010). The teacher should:

1. Ensure feedback comments are not just backward looking (explaining why the grade was awarded) but also include a plentiful supply of forward looking feedback.
2. Make feedback timely, so the relevance is still seen as pertinent to the student.
3. Plan for students' reflection on learning activities and feedback which will make students increasingly aware of how to improve their learning and thus more ready to engage with feedback.
4. Return marked work with feedback comments only (excluding the grade). Ask students to reflect on the feedback comments, after which their grades are released.
5. Ask students to reflect on your feedback and respond to it.
6. Require students to reflect on feedback and prepare a short action plan addressing how they can make improvements in future work.
7. Design a series of assessment tasks requiring students to build upon earlier work. For example, ask students to submit with subsequent tasks how they have attended to earlier feedback.
8. Include opportunities for peer review.
9. Plan to have conversations about the assessment and feedback. Encourage discourse by arranging in-class break-out discussion groups to discuss marking rubrics, guides and generic feedback comments.

Ways to provide effective feedback
1. The teacher should be sensitive to individual needs of the students. It is vital that the teacher considers each student individually when giving feedback. Our classrooms are full of diverse learners. Some students need to be nudged to achieve at a higher level and others need to be handled very gently so as not to discourage learning and damage self-esteem. A balance between not wanting to hurt a student's feelings and providing proper encouragement is essential.
2. Dinham (2007a) posited that learners always want to know where they stand regarding their work and that providing answers to the following four questions on a regular basis will help provide quality feedback. These four questions are also helpful when providing feedback to parents: What can the student do? What can't the student do? How does the student's work compare with those of others? How can the student do better? The answers to these questions

will not only direct the teachers and parents, the answers will also put the students on the right pedestrian to improve their learning and performance.

3.   It is advised that the teacher hosts a one-on-one conference with the students. Providing a one-on-one meeting with the students is one of the most effective means of giving feedback. It enables the students express themselves freely and affords the opportunity to ask questions their own way without feeling shy of other members of the class. A one-on-one conference should be generally optimistic and interesting to encourage students to participate subsequently.

4.   The teacher should ensure that only one skill is dealt with at a time. It makes a far greater impact on the student when only one skill is critiqued at a time rather than focussing on all the skills taught in the period under consideration.

5.   The students should be taught how to give feedback to each other.   The teacher should train students to be able to give each other constructive feedback in a way that is positive and helpful. Inculcate in the students what appropriate feedback is and encourage them to give it to oneself, other students, and the teacher.

6.   The teacher should from time to time invite other teachers to come and give verbal face to face feedback in the class or request other teachers to grade the students' scripts. This will have the effect of added information and a realisation by the students that their teacher is not alone in giving feedback. It will also let them know who else to meet (apart from their teacher) for clarification of their teacher's comments and their doubts.

7.   The student should be required to take notes during one-on-one feedback sessions. The student can use a notebook to jot down notes as you (the teacher) provide the verbal feedback. When using the feedback, the notes will have the effect of making available for the students information to refer to after the session. It must be emphasised here again that feedback that is not utilised is no feedback.

8.   Teachers must endeavour to return test and assignment scripts promptly and at the beginning of class to allow students ask necessary questions and to hold relevant discussions during and after the class. It will also aid the teachers and students during the present class.

9.   Allow your students to give you feedback on how you are doing as a teacher? Let them do it anonymously. What did they like about your class? What did they not like? If they were teaching the class, what would they have done differently? What did they learn the most from you as a teacher? If you are open, you will learn much about yourself as an educator. Remember that feedback goes both ways, and as a teacher it is wise to never stop improving and honing your skills. But first communicate the meaning and purpose of feedback to your students. This way, they will be sure of what to look for when evaluating you as a teacher.

10.   Sometimes the teacher overburdens students with feedback. One important issue teachers need to understand is that they should limit the amount of feedback they are providing (Brinko, 1993). Otherwise, the teacher may find his students uninterested and bored with the feedback they are getting. Similarly, the teacher should not set up too many criteria for students to follow. The teacher should limit the number of criteria to the most important aspects of a coursework and giving feedback on them (Sadler, 1985). "One thing at a time, that's done well", they say.

11.   The teacher must recognise, when giving written feedback, that the emotions of students may be quite heightened when they receive their work back, covered with feedback comments (red marks) from you. In other words, they can be particularly sensitive to the feedback they receive, especially the first few comments they read.   Thus, as a teacher, you must ensure that you put limited red marks on your students' scripts; you do not give grades or scores until the students have seen and perhaps used the feedback you provided; and that you make feedback comments and suggestions friendly and explanatory with "feed-forward" remarks.

12.   Keep your frowns in check when giving verbal feedback. It is imperative that you examine your non-verbal cues. Facial expressions and gestures are also means of delivering feedback. When you have a lot of verbal feedback to give to a group of students, it is useful to make notes in advance, to save you having to remember on-the-spot the particular feedback messages you

intend to give to each student. It is sometimes useful to prepare these notes in a form which students can take away to serve as reminders from the feedback session.

13. If the same feedback is meant for a large cross section of the class, the teacher should use whole class face-to-face context. This will have the effect of reaching all the students involved at the same time (therefore, saving time), bringing the additional dimensions of tone-of-voice, body language and more to bear on increasing students' feeling that they are not alone in the problem at hand and that detailed feedback has been provided.

14. When dealing with difficult feedback situations, involving some emotional response, the teacher must remain calm and supportive. He must provide time for the feedback recipient to express his emotions while he listens patiently and demonstrates that he understands what the recipient is saying. The teacher must avoid prescriptive solutions but rather invite the feedback recipient to suggest suitable solutions to the problem. Where necessary, the teacher should accept to reschedule the feedback session for some future date.

Benefits of effective feedback in teaching and learning
Feedback is important for both the teacher and learner as it improves learning, influences making learners responsive to their learning, and richly enhances teachers' teaching. Some benefits include that effective feedback:

1. Identifies for the student the gap between their level of performance and their desired level of learning (Shute, 2008). The gaps that arise as a result of the teaching and process are the burden which effective feedback uncovers and remedies.

2**.** Creates responsive learners and being responsive to learning and feedback improves learning and enhances students' reflection on their work. When students are responsive in processing the feedback and information received from the teacher, learning is enhanced (Chappuis, 2012). Teachers must, therefore, assist students to develop the skill of responding to feedback because students who are good in self-regulation achieve highly (Nicol, 2009).

3. Occurs from teachers to students and from students to teachers. The implication is that as the student uses information from feedback to improve his learning, the teacher also uses the information from feedback to sharpen his teaching, adjust his strategies, and improve his relationship with students. The act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the assessed. Assessors learn about the extent to which the assessed (students) have developed expertise and the assessor can tailor his teaching accordingly (Yorke, 2003). Black and William (2009) added that feedback allows teachers to build models of how their students learn and to use this to inform future teaching and feedback processes, which on the whole produce better learners with enhanced learning skills, that result in improved learners' academic performance.

4. Provides clear information about students' behaviour and what is expected of them, thereby reshaping their behaviour. Especially when self-assessment and peer-assessment are involved, students' reflection on their work and approvals/disapprovals from peers enrich effective feedback and enhance students' learning.

5. Promotes curiosity and encourages students to try new behaviours, especially when students interact with one another, exchanging and reviewing teacher's comments on their responses, and sharing ideas resulting from learning, assignments/tests, and feedback from the teacher. Effective feedback creates in students the enthusiasm and motivation to find out more. The result is enhanced learning and improved outcome.

6. Enhances students' desire to learn, by increasing their self-esteem and confidence whenever possible, and by helping them to believe that they can indeed achieve the intended learning outcomes and demonstrate this in ways where they will be duly credited for this achievement.

7. Motivates students to move forward into their next episodes of learning by doing, and focusing their efforts more sharply towards bringing the experience from their past work to bear on making their next work better.

8.   Becomes one of the most powerful tools available to shape one another's behavior when peer-assessment is used. Feedback helps students to clarify and take ownership of what they have learned as defined by the intended learning outcomes they are working towards achieving.

9.   Makes students and teachers learn at the same time. Student-to-student feedback is often received more positively than teacher-to-student feedback. With basic instruction and ongoing support, students can learn to be exceptional peer strategists, providing thoughtful insight into what works from an audience's perspective and offering constructive strategies for improvement.

10.   Encourages students to gain some control of their learning which enhances students' learning and academic achievement. This increases students' engagement and awareness of their strengths and challenges and opens up endless opportunities for students and teachers alike to grow. Such an environment builds trust in and enthusiasm for the entire teaching and learning process, makes learning exciting and creates infinite possibilities for students to discover themselves.

CONCLUSION

Feedback is a very important aspect of the teaching-learning environment. It enhances the integration of knowledge, skills and behaviours of teachers and learners in the classroom. Feedback is central to the development of competence and confidence of both teachers and learners at all stages of education. Feedback exists in all processes, activities, and information that enhance learning. It provides the opportunity for learners to reflect on their marks and understand their strengths as well as identify areas requiring improvement, and for teachers to reflect on their teaching strategies. This paper focused on effective feedback which is dynamic, behaviour specific, timely, interactive, constructive (must enhance future learning) and must be attended to.   It is hoped that if the exploits of this paper are followed, the teacher will provide effective feedback which will benefit both students and teachers optimally.

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