The importance of explicitly teaching students to use feedback

It is important to discuss with students what feedback is and how best to engage with it. Feedback is not a unidirectional process of tutors delivering comments to students.

> "If information is simply stored in memory and never used, it is not feedback" (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005, p. 381).

> "While the quality of the comments is important, the quality of the students' interaction with those comments is equally, perhaps more, important" (Nicol, 2010, p. 503).

One should not assume that, upon arriving at university, students already possess the skills to decipher and apply feedback for themselves. At school and college, pupils receive high levels of formative assessment accompanied with lots of opportunities for regular direct dialogue with teachers. In sharp contrast, at university they tend to be faced with high levels of summative assessment and written feedback where follow up dialogue with a tutor is often not automatically built in.

> "Since students arrive at university without [the skills of independent or self-directed learning], and they cannot be expected to absorb them by osmosis, skill development needs scaffolding to enable the transition of students from the familiar, high levels of interaction they experienced at school, towards the self-directed behaviour desired by university" (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2008, p. 62).

Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon (2008) conducted a large-scale research project on feedback at university and, based on their findings, made two important recommendations:

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1. Explicitly teach self-directed learning skills

The first requirement is for university tutors to articulate clearly what they expect of students. Discuss the learning design of their programme in terms of the intended learning outcomes, the choice of assessment and the marking criteria. Directly discuss with students the ethos of independent or self-directed learning. Once this is clear, first-year curricula require redesign to actively teach these skills.

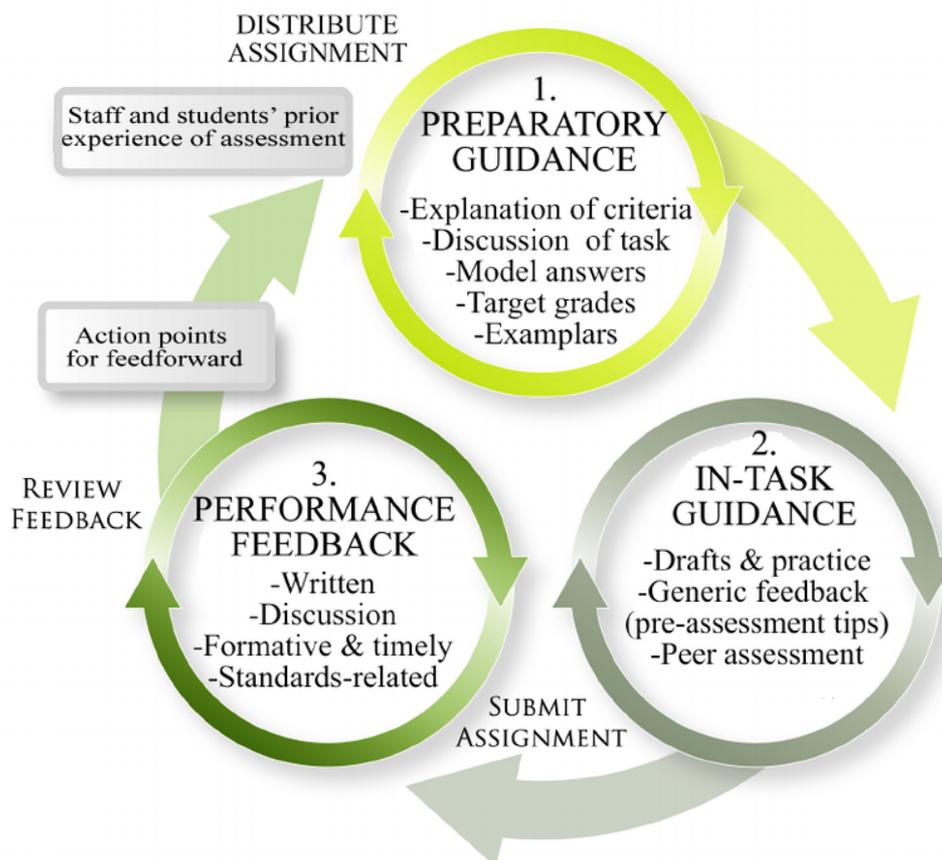## 2. Refocus effort on stages 1 and 2 of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle

Figure 1. Dialogic Feedback Cycle (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2008). !

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Beaumont et al. suggest that schools tend to use the Dialogic Feedback Cycle (DFC) outlined in the diagram above. They recommend that universities pay greater attention to Stage 1 and 2 in the first year of undergraduate studies using it to scaffold self-directed learning.

- "Stage 1: Integrate students more effectively into an agreed academic community of practice through 'front loading' feedback as preparatory guidance".

Once again this requires redesign of aspects of the course, to build in time for workshops that engage students with assessment criteria and discussion of exemplars (Rust, 2003). Although Rust reported that self-assessment skills had not improved when students attended a single workshop, Beaumont et al. advocate the repeated application of the method throughout the year to reinforce the application of learning.

- "Stage 2: Encourage staff/student engagement with formative feedback to maximise 'feedforward': viewing feedback as a single event does not enhance the student experience

Beaumont et al. show clear evidence that students will act on feedback on drafts at Stage 2 of the DFC. However, the issue of drafts is contentious, since it is highly time consuming for the tutor to mark. The 'obvious' answer seems to be peer assessment, although this needs careful introduction to overcome student opposition and potential issues of plagiarism and gaming behaviour.

Summary

To improve student engagement with feedback, it is recommended that tutors:

•   better understand the prior assessment feedback experience of school students (the DFC);

•   design courses to scaffold the development of self-directed learning skills;

•   incorporate formative feedback as in-task guidance, such as tutor/peer assessment of drafts incorporate activities to engage students with assessment criteria, such as use of exemplars.

References

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