Providing feedback to students
A good teaching tip-sheet

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This tip-sheet provides ideas and opinions for providing feedback to students, from RMIT lecturers who discussed their teaching experiences as part of the Course Experience Survey (CES) Analysis Project (http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/CESanalysis).

Feedback from teachers is vital for students, and has been demonstrated to have a significant impact on learning and achievement.

The CES explores student experience of feedback through two items:

• Item 5: ‘The teaching staff normally give me helpful feedback on how I am going in this course’
• Item 20: ‘The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work’

In discussions of these items with RMIT staff, several issues emerge:

• differing interpretations of what constitutes feedback (especially between students and staff), and of what types and amount of feedback were seen as adequate
• differing approaches to providing feedback on progress (and comments on student work) across courses, due to the nature of the subject area or class size
• difficulties faced by lecturers in providing effective feedback to larger classes without using up a significant proportion of teaching time.

A range of methods for dealing with these issues have been suggested by current RMIT teaching staff. Some of these are summarised below.

What methods are lecturers using to provide feedback to students?

Class discussion and interaction

“In all my courses, one of my aims is to help my students to become questioners. I try to provide a framework which is reinforcing and non-intimidating, in which they feel comfortable enough to ask questions, and I emphasize that there are no dumb questions … I believe the questions my students ask are more important than the answers.”

• Encourage questions and work through problems or solutions in class, to help students feel they are not alone in needing clarification.
• Suggest students keep a log book of specific questions to ask. This helps to focus attention on exactly what was not understood, and might assist students to discover the answer for themselves.
• Use questions to obtain feedback from students; how well they are understanding topics, and which areas needed more attention.
• Use class discussion (along with group work and self/peer assessment) to encourage students to work things out for themselves.
Written feedback

“At the start of each semester I always inform my students that they can all achieve a High Distinction if they work for it. I give them the opportunity to do as well as they can through draft submission; providing feedback with a marking sheet to indicate what is well done or needs improvement. I also give global feedback in class, from which they can all benefit.”

- Develop a **standardised repository of feedback responses** that can be copied/pasted into student work, detailing why something is good or needs improvement.
- Provide students with the opportunity to **submit drafts**, and provide formative feedback to assist in the preparation of a high-quality final version.

Positive feedback and encouragement

“Create an environment where students feel comfortable enough to practice, make honest mistakes, and learn from them.”

- Students can develop and achieve throughout the course with **positive guidance** and **helpful feedback**. Impress upon your students that, with persistence, practice and determination they can all succeed.
- Recognise and reward students’ **efforts** and **skill development** when marking assessments, as well the content of their work.
- Consider giving students **full credit** for honest effort in assignments, regardless of quality (while still maintaining a pass/fail standard).

Individual feedback/comments

“We encourage students not just to rely on us as ‘knowledge holders’, but to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and life experiences within the peer group, and to be able to draw on and contribute to that wealth. We aim to promote in them a sense of empowerment over their own learning, and also to promote constructive criticism to each other.”

- Encourage students to **provide feedback on each others’ work** – and to seek feedback from peers as well as the lecturer.
- Stimulate and maintain student interest, and promote motivation with **verbal encouragement**.
- In practical classes, **interact with students** as they work and provide verbal feedback and guidance.

Email and Blackboard

“Blackboard is a good form of engagement outside the class; a way of continuing the conversation.”

- Electronic communication can be a **highly efficient** means of providing feedback to students. Use Blackboard announcements to communicate with the entire class, or email to provide personal and/or confidential feedback to individual students.
- Keep records for all students and email an **individual progress report** to each of them at the mid-point of the course, outlining how they are travelling in the subject and inviting those experiencing difficulties to arrange for a follow-up meeting.
- Provide **update emails** every three to four weeks to summarise/ review important points, highlight future directions and provide both specific and general feedback. This approach can also provide positive reinforcement for successful, engaging class work or discussion.
Managing student expectations

“I give my students detailed assessment criteria in the first lecture, and I provide feedback based on these criteria. This encourages consistency, and assists my students’ understanding of what is required. I believe that students must have confidence that, if they address the criteria, the results will be there; if not, they will be given clear feedback and guidelines on how to improve.”

- Using **set criteria and guides** for marking provides students clear guidance as to what is expected of them in their assignments.
- These guides may also be an effective way to **notify students that feedback will be given** on their work. This can encourage a more considered approach to tasks from the beginning, thereby enhancing learning.
- Ensure the students are actually aware that feedback is being provided. One lecturer made questions and feedback the focus of the class tutorial every Friday, and dubbed this class ‘Feedback Friday’.
- Explicitly **outline the methods** you will be using to provide feedback: a marking guide for assignment feedback, discussion in class for general issues, email/consultation for individual feedback, etc.
- **Provide examples** of good and poor answers/submissions to assignments, essays and problems. This provides students with a model of what they would need to achieve in order to receive a top grade.

Highlight on a feedback approach: TERISSA

“I found the use of TERISSA in my course was very beneficial for students in that it caused them to reflect on problems. I also found that my GTS score for feedback in the class increased after its introduction.”

Associate Professor Iouri Belski from the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering has developed a specific method of increasing discussion, feedback and interaction which he refers to as ‘Task Evaluation and Reflection Instrument for Student Self Assessment’ – or TERISSA.

TERISSA requires students to complete two task evaluations: one when the task is first presented, and another after the task has been resolved. Students then reflect on each of these evaluations and on the reasons for any discrepancy between them.

This approach encourages students to evaluate problems to find the best approach, and provides feedback on their level of understanding and highlights areas of weakness.

See [http://www.terissa.com](http://www.terissa.com) for further information.

The ‘Good teaching tip-sheets’ provide a brief summary of findings from interviews conducted with RMIT lecturers from 44 courses who discussed their teaching experiences as part of the CES Analysis Project.

Participants were asked about changes they had made to their course, and their motivations for doing so, and also about the ways in which they addressed the Good Teaching Survey (GTS) items most highly correlated with good teaching.

For full reports, documentation and related services, visit the project website at [http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/CESanalysis](http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/CESanalysis).