Coffee and Cookies: 
Conversations on Good Teaching

Part 1 - PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

This series of ‘Conversations’ was inspired by interviews with lecturers from 44 courses who accepted an invitation to discuss their teaching experiences as part of the CES Analysis Project. They 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 GTS items most highly correlated with good teaching. The gift of their valuable time, and their honesty, in these conversations on good teaching is most gratefully acknowledged, as is the permission to share some of their wonderful ideas on how to create a valuable learning experience for students.

More details about the CES Analysis Project and the ‘Coffee & Cookies’ Summary of Findings can be found online at http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/cesanalysis.

A project conducted by Helen Monk and Robert Webster investigated the experiences of various students beginning their studies at RMIT in 2007. The report, ‘Discussions with Commencing Students’, is available at http://www.rmit.edu.au/planning-group/student-feedback-reports and several of the findings are used here to reflect the views of some RMIT students on those issues discussed with lecturers.
A Thought to Begin With . . .

We hope that, if you are inspired by any of the ideas shared here, you will take them and give them the flavour of your own personality, for use in your own way, in your own classes. Ken Bain uses a wonderful analogy to illustrate the need for each teacher to "digest, transform, and individualise what (they) see" when he notes that painting with the same brush strokes as Rembrandt would not, of itself, "replicate his genius".

"To take the Rembrandt analogy a step further, the great Dutch artist could not be Picasso any more than the Spanish painter could replicate his predecessor; each had to find his own genius. So too must teachers adjust every idea to who they are and what they teach."

*What the Best College Teachers Do, Ken Bain (2005, p.21)*

Providing Feedback to Students

It is a truth universally acknowledged that feedback is vital for students; researchers have recognised for years the strength of its impact on learning and achievement (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Hattie, 2003; Jackson, 1997; Ramsden, 1992; Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005). The Good Teaching Scale (GTS) items from the Course Experience Survey (CES) which relate to feedback, in particular, seem to have caused much consternation over the past few years for many staff: Item 5 'The teaching staff normally give me helpful feedback on how I am going in this course' and Item 20 'The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work'. Interestingly, statistical analysis showed that these two items correlated most highly with good teaching in 29 of the 41 subject areas for which a distinct Good Teaching Factor could be ascertained in Semester 1, 2007. In a further 9 subject areas, one of these items was the factor most highly correlated with good teaching.

During discussions with staff, two main issues surrounding these items emerged. One was differing interpretations of what constitutes feedback (especially between students and staff), and of what types and amount of feedback were seen as adequate. The other was the issue of how lecturers can provide effective feedback to larger classes without using up every available hour of every day to do so! Feedback on progress was also often provided very differently due to the nature of the subject area or class size, as was commenting directly on student work. Responses to these two items have been combined, as commenting directly on student work was generally also referred to as ‘giving feedback’ by staff. Also, according to student CES responses, these two items were highly positively correlated.

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1 High correlation of an item to a factor indicates there was considerable variation in the responses to that item. In this case, student responses were spread across the Likert scale of 1 - 5 rather than tending to cluster around any particular options; indicating a lack of agreement among students as to how well feedback and commenting on work was being provided in courses.

2 Positive correlation indicates a relationship between the items. This means that, where the score for one item changes, the score for the other item will change in the same direction. In this case, where students gave a high score for helpful feedback on progress, they were almost certain to have scored highly for commenting on work as well. By the same token, a poor score for feedback on progress would most likely be accompanied by a poor score for commenting on work.
Feedback

What methods are lecturers using to provide feedback to students?

As seen in Figure 1, the two methods most highly favoured for providing feedback to students were class discussion and written feedback. However, generally a variety of approaches was used. (It must be noted that 21 of these respondents were only asked about changes in their provision of feedback, so only their new methods are reflected here.) Many lecturers felt it was important to ensure their feedback to students was “timely”, regardless of the method employed. Researchers have also suggested that feedback must be given promptly to be useful to students (Gross Davis, 1993; Jackson, 1997). Indeed, RMIT students indicated that slow feedback “negated the usefulness” of early assessment tasks (Monk & Webster, 2008), while an English student commented on the dispiriting effect of waiting too long for feedback (Anonymous, 2008).

Class discussion and interaction was a popular platform for providing feedback in 2007. This included encouraging questions, and working through problems or solutions, in class. Many of the lecturers felt that the sharing of questions in class could help students feel they were not alone in needing clarification, a point also observed in research (Bain, 2004; Klopfenstein, 2003). One lecturer encouraged students to keep a log book of specific questions to ask. The aim of this was twofold. Firstly, to discourage ‘I don’t get it’ type comments and focus attention on exactly what was not understood, particularly where lack of understanding of an area was common and could be addressed through class discussion. Secondly, the lecturer found that, in breaking things down to pinpoint precisely what they don’t understand, students often discover the answer for themselves. If they still need assistance, it is easier for the lecturer to address a specific problem area than a vague lack of understanding. Another lecturer who wishes to emphasize to his students the importance of asking questions quotes a humorous example from ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’ by Douglas Adams:
“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. In ‘Hitchhikers’ Guide to the Galaxy’ a super computer, named Deep Thought, is created to find the answer to life, the universe and everything. It takes Deep Thought 7 and a half million years to compute the answer – 42. People are confused and dismayed by this answer, and sure it must be wrong. His response? ‘I checked it very thoroughly and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is.’ In the same way, I believe the questions my students ask are more important than the answers. The answers, like 42, are not much use to them if they don’t first know how to ask the questions.”

Bain (2004) also contends that questions are crucial to building knowledge, and encouraging “critical conversation”. According to Biggs (1999), learning happens best when “Students can work collaboratively and in dialogue with others, both peers and teachers. Good dialogue elicits those activities that shape, elaborate, and deepen understanding” (p.61). Involving students in discussion also stimulates thinking and problem solving (Bain, 2004), as well as enabling lecturers to ascertain the level of their students’ understanding (Jackson, 1997). Some of the lecturers found that working through solutions to problems in class offered these benefits. They were able to provide feedback to students on how effectively they were applying their learning, especially by giving global comment on homework and assignments, and could encourage interactive problem solving. They could also obtain feedback from their students; through this interaction lecturers could often determine how well students were understanding topics, and which areas needed more attention. RMIT students themselves placed a high priority on interaction, stating that they were “most engaged in learning” where classes were “interesting and interactive” (Monk & Webster, 2008).

Six of these lecturers also specifically noted the use of class discussion, along with group work and self and peer assessment to encourage students to ‘work things out for themselves’. The importance of encouraging students to build their own understanding, and assisting them to do so, is well recognised (Bain, 2004; Biggs, 1999). Group work and self and peer assessment are beneficial for students in several ways. They can assist in developing critical thinking, presentation and co-operative skills, as well as increasing independence and responsibility in learning. They also provide feedback from a source other than the lecturer, and the opportunity for students to reflect on their own, and others’, work and ideas (Axelrod, 2007; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Falchikov, 2005). Monk and Webster (2008) found that, while self directed learning was initially overwhelming for many RMIT students, they came to prefer this style, as long as they were supported in adapting to it. Students also appreciated the advantages of group work, but noted that strong guidelines were necessary to avoid problems arising within groups (Falchikov, 2005; Monk & Webster, 2008).

In a course where interaction was central - students worked on a “real life” group project from day one of the course - the lecturer described the benefits for students:

“Students in my classes are required to work in an industry-type setting, with each student responsible for their own part of the project and working with one or two others to complete a section. I support them in this role by providing feedback as I interact with them both individually and in groups, and I also encourage them to seek feedback from each other on their work. It's in this interactive, “real world” environment that I really see them “getting it”. They love the responsibility and power associated with controlling everything that goes into a section and so they truly care how their work looks and reads. There's a friendly competition between sections with each group wanting to do their best.

As in the “real world”, the students encounter problems with their project development, making things “fit” or with software, and have to find ways to adapt and problem solve. Group discussions make quick work of all of this and often lead to a collective effort to help each other out. Again, there is such a pride of work and a desire for a good-looking, quality product in this course that the students naturally bond and cooperate. These projects are their audition for prospective employers. They work together because they want to, not just because they need to.”

In another course, the lecturer increased discussion, feedback and interaction through the implementation of TERISSA (Task Evaluation and Reflection Instrument for Student Self Assessment). TERISSA is a method of evaluating and reflecting on problems either individually or as a class (see www.terissa.com for information). It encourages students to think about problems and find the best approach, provides feedback on their level of understanding and highlights areas of weakness.
TERISSA supports the idea that “Teaching that promotes learning develops self-evaluation” (Jackson, 1997) and recognises the importance of opportunities for self reflection (Klopfenstein, 2003).

“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.”

Written feedback was also widely used, with lecturers often describing this feedback as ‘lengthy’ or ‘detailed’. This included several who said they had increased the amount or quality of their written feedback. Two had introduced the use of standardised copy and paste of why something is good or needs improvement (to cut time spent and enable more detail). Ramsden (1992) notes this as an excellent and efficient way to provide feedback, especially where there are large numbers of students. One of these lecturers observed that, since providing feedback in the form of a typed spreadsheet rather than handwritten, students seemed to “study it more.”

Many of these lecturers had also introduced, or were already offering, the opportunity for students to submit drafts, in order for them to obtain formative feedback. Axelrod (2007) describes a learning environment where feedback is formative and continuous as having “enriched the intellectual environment.” He quotes a student who benefited from this ongoing evaluation and input: “We not only learn more, we learn better” (Axelrod, 2007). Palmer provides formative assessment with feedback and advice on how to improve “. . . to show students that the intent of evaluation is to offer guidelines for learning rather than terminal judgements” (Palmer, 2007, p.141). RMIT students desired formative assessment both to spread their load across semester, and to gain an idea of their progress (Monk & Webster, 2008). Jackson used the following to illustrate simply the difference between formative and summative assessment:

“Formative assessment is the advice a coach offers an athlete in training. Summative assessment is the score that judges offer at events.” (Jackson, 1997)

One of the lecturers, who encouraged draft submissions as a way to provide feedback to his students as well as a way to increase their understanding in the subject, put it this way:

“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, as well as long comment. I also give global feedback in class, from which they can all benefit. I always encourage them to just have a go – even if they are experiencing difficulties with an assignment. I say to them, ‘Write anything; we can fix it up later’. I want all of my students to learn and achieve as much as they can.”

Being positive and encouraging in giving feedback was important to several lecturers, and the impact on student motivation of kindness and encouragement has also been observed in research (Gross Davis, 1993; Jackson, 1997). Weller (2005) notes that “learning occurs more effectively when the student experiences feelings of satisfaction.” These lecturers recognised and rewarded students’ efforts and skill development when marking assessments, as well the content of their work. This recognition aligns with much of the research, which emphasises the importance of rewarding sincere effort, providing constructive feedback, and realising the impact of teacher feedback on students (Axelrod, 2007; Bain, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Gross Davis, 1993). It may also be important considering the increase in the ‘range of ability’ of those students now attending university (Biggs & Tang, 2007). One lecturer who gave students full credit for honest effort in assignments, regardless of quality (but indicating pass/fail standard) had as his goal:

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

Another lecturer impresses upon students that, with “persistence, practice and determination” they can all succeed. She fondly remembered some past students who were initially resistant to this idea, and
how much they learned, developed and achieved throughout the course with positive guidance and helpful feedback. One young man, in expressing his gratitude for this affirmative support, said to her,

“I was always hopeless at this subject, but you showed me I could do it.”

Individual verbal feedback/commenting on work was also used, particularly (but not exclusively) where lecturers worked closely with students and the subject was very “hands on”. Verbal encouragement and feedback can stimulate student interest or, at least, maintain it, and promote intrinsic motivation in students (Bain, 2004). In practical classes, lecturers gave verbal feedback to help guide students and interact with them as they worked. There was often also encouragement for students to provide feedback on each others’ work, and seek feedback from peers as well as the lecturer. Two lecturers who shared both the teaching of a course and a philosophy of teaching, found this verbal interaction to be beneficial for all involved.

“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. We encourage thought and reflection so that critical feedback is useful and detailed. We find that this support of each other generates good will and enthusiasm among the students, and they really develop their ideas through the sharing. We also encourage them to reflect on the feedback which has influenced their work or inspired them, as well as thinking about how they may have inspired others.”

Marking guides or criteria were employed by some lecturers to assist provision of feedback. A recurring theme in interviews with RMIT students was the need for clarity, particularly of expectations (Monk & Webster, 2008). Marking guides or criteria provide students with clear guidance as to what is expected of them in their assignments, and “students perform better when they are clear in their own minds about what is required of them by the assessment system” (McMahon, 2006). These guides may also be an effective way to notify students that feedback will be given on their work. An interesting 2005 study found that students’ expectation that they would receive feedback appeared to encourage a more considered approach to tasks from the beginning, thereby enhancing learning even before feedback was given (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005). A lecturer who had introduced marking guides was motivated to do so in order to increase consistency and clarity:

“I have found that poor verbal communication can cause problems for students in knowing what is expected of them. I give my students detailed assessment criteria in the first lecture, and I provide feedback based on these criteria, using Likert scales and qualitative feedback. 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.”

DLS/email were being utilised by lecturers to provide feedback to students. At RMIT in 2007, students “confirmed that they want more from the online environment” (Monk & Webster, 2008). Several lecturers were fulfilling this wish in diverse ways. In increasing his use of the DLS, one lecturer had found that:

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

Another kept records for all students, and in week eight emailed an individual progress report to each of them. This outlined how they were travelling in the subject, and invited those experiencing difficulties to see the lecturer for assistance. In yet another class, the lecturer introduced update emails, which included ‘Happy Messages’, for example, “Today’s class went really well . . . “, for positive reinforcement. These emails were sent to students every three to four weeks, and provided review and future direction, as well as both specific and general feedback. Below is an excerpt from a late semester email.

“The results for your exams are now available. Before you have a look at them, I would like to say well done to all of you. We all knew that you would all do better than you thought you would, but you have exceeded my expectations. These results are just fantastic! It was obvious that all of you had used the mock exam as a positive learning experience and had fine tuned your answers accordingly. For your interest 95% of the class passed the
exam, and for the results, the highest mark was 108.5/110, the lowest 46.5/110, and the average 79/110 (72% = D)). The answers to the case studies are below & the images are available in the course notes folder for you to review. Again, well done to you all, this is a great result! :-))"

This is an example of an effective way to provide general feedback to an entire class, which is not necessarily in response to an assignment, yet is still directive and informative (Jackson, 1997). RMIT students appreciated emails from lecturers which kept them up to date and provided helpful information, but noted that they weren’t received for all courses (Monk & Webster, 2008).

Labelling feedback was introduced by some lecturers in 2007 simply to remind students that it is actually provided! One lecturer made questions and feedback the focus of his Friday tutorial and dubbed this class “Feedback Friday”. Again, this labelling tells the students that they can expect feedback on their work, which may provide previously unanticipated benefits (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005 – see ‘Marking guides or criteria’ above).

A few lecturers explained why a particular method was used, in order to highlight its use to students, as well as any limitations. For example, a lecturer teaching large classes calculated with each class how many hours it would take to provide detailed written feedback on all assignments. With the total obviously impossible, he then explained the methods he would instead apply – a marking guide for individual feedback, and discussion in class for general issues. The lecturer also used old examples of good and poor answers in class, as well as demonstrating the type of assignment which would receive a top grade, for students to model their own work upon. Students clearly understood what kind of feedback they would receive, how and when, and what the lecturer expected from them in their work. Ramsden (1992) notes that this kind of ‘modelling’ is an excellent way to provide feedback to large classes, as well as a way to make expectations very clear. RMIT students strongly expressed their desire for clear parameters in the learning environment to avoid confusion (Monk & Webster, 2008).

The Personal Nature of Teaching

In these conversations, lecturers shared many of the diverse ways in which they approach the issue of providing effective feedback to their students. Some of these methods, such as class discussion, were used by many. Others, such as ‘Feedback Friday’ were ideas developed by the lecturer as a result of their experiences, research and reflections. Even where two lecturers gave the same initial response to the question, it often became apparent that the way in which they applied the same method could vary.

It was frequently noted that it is important for teachers to be true to themselves and their own philosophy of teaching in their classes. Lecturers made comments like “I know that works for some people, but it’s just not me”, “I don’t feel comfortable doing that in my classes”, or “It just fits with what I believe about good teaching to do it this way”. The fact that these people are open to other ideas is evidenced by the number who talked in the interviews about their desire to see more sharing of ideas, or about the approaches they used which were inspired by someone else. However, it is important to these lecturers that they feel free to teach in the way that is most comfortable for them, and most beneficial for their students. This theme is echoed in much of the literature, which acknowledges the difficulty of defining exactly what good teaching is when it can be so many different things, in spite of commonalities, and is so very personal at its best (Bain, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Kane et al, 2004; Lowman, 1996; Palmer, 2007; Ramsden, 1992).

Coupled with this was the need to provide feedback in the most effective way for each particular discipline. Lecturers often acknowledged that a method of giving feedback which proved successful in one of their classes didn’t always effectively translate to others, for various reasons including subject, class size and learning objectives. The impact of these factors also cannot be underestimated when considering the nature of good teaching (Bain, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Ramsden,
1992). Many lecturers were also acutely aware of the individual needs of their students, and were prepared to adjust the way in which they gave feedback in order to make it as useful as possible to each one of them.

The stories shared here by lecturers about the ways in which they provide feedback to their students, and their reasons for doing so, surely demonstrate that, while “There is no single way to teach effectively . . . when teaching succeeds, it is identified and remembered” (Axelrod, 2007).

Acknowledgements

Thanks must go firstly to Professor Jim Barber, for his support of this project. I would also like to thank the following people who assisted with mail outs, data, advice and direction, proofreading and suggestions, encouragement and coffee:

Ms. Faye Thomas, Dr. Anthony Bedford, Ms. Stephanie Romagnano, Ms. Sally Daniel, Ms. Margaret Blackburn, Dr. Josephine Lang, Mr. John Milton, Ms. Helen Monk, Mr. Andrew Buntine

Most importantly, my gratitude goes to the lecturers who gave their time and shared their insights. Their names, apart from those who wished to remain anonymous, are listed here.

Mr. Luis Alban
Mrs. Lee Anton-Hern
Ms. Suzie Attiwill
Mr. Peter Burton
Mr. Stewart Carter
Mr. Paul Cerotti
Dr. Anne-Marie Christensen
Ms. Amanda Crane
Ms. Aida Culpan
Ms. Robyn Dale
Dr. Amalia Di Iorio
Associate Professor Phillip Ebrall
Ms. Susan Elliott
Ms. Irene Ellis
Ms. Rys Farthing

Mr. Mark Galer
Ms. Glenys Grob
Associate Professor James Harland
Mr. Robert Inglis
Dr. Nira Jayasuriya
Mr. Tom Josev
Dr. George Lenon
Dr. Lynne Li
Ms. Maree Macmillan
Associate Professor Theo Macrides
Ms. Marietta Martinovic
Dr. Bee May
Associate Professor Jock McCulloch
Professor Catherine McDonald

Dr. Keith McVilly
Ms. Clare Miller
Ms. Kerry Montero
Dr. Berenice Nyland
Dr. Tim O’Shannassy
Mr. Phred Petersen
Ms. Kathryn Robson
Ms. Simone Rodda
Mr. Grant Roff
Dr. Andrew Scott
Professor Dianne Siemon
Mr. Brian Thorpe
Associate Professor Kevin White
Ms. Sally Wright

"In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honour and the highest responsibility anyone could have."

Lee Iacocca

References


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