# ENhance ACTIVITY BRIEFING SHEET

## How can we give students better quality feedback?

**DLTE**
Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement

**Kay Sambell, Sally Brown, Phil Race**

*These activities have been designed for use by Academic Leads, Programme Leaders, Learning and Teaching Champions and others working with colleagues to address specific issues around assessment and feedback.*

## What's the problem?

Students often complain in module evaluations, National Student Surveys and the like that the feedback they receive is inadequate, inconsistent, late or insufficient to help them remediate errors and achieve their best. This activity is designed to help course teams and individuals to clarify for themselves and students what good feedback looks like.

## What resources are needed for this activity?

A room large enough to hold participants working in groups of 3-4, flipchart with stand and pens or whiteboard, and post-its. For the activity to work well, at least a dozen participants need to engage; larger numbers up to around 100 can be accommodated. Allow around 60 minutes to get a good discussion going.
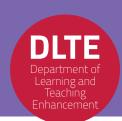
## Activity

1. Divide the people in the room into two halves: the people on the left-hand side of the room are going to deal with the 'nightmare' scenario and the people on the right-hand side of the room are going to be dealing with the optimised 'dream' scenario.

2. Task for Nightmare half. In subgroups of 3-5, ask participants to write on post-its as many ways they can think of to make feedback to students really damaging and unhelpful. (Participants often find this approach very easy, and quite amusing.)

3. Task for the Dream-scene group. Again, asking participants to work in groups of 3-5, ask them to identify as many features as they can of feedback that is genuinely helpful to students. In many cases these will be the flip side of the nightmare scenarios.

4. If there are fewer than 20 in this half, ask the sub-groups to collate their post-its onto a piece of flipchart paper and then present them to the full group in turn.

5. If there are lots of people in this half, ask them to call theirs out in plenary and you can write them up in summary on a flipchart at the front.

6. As facilitator, draw from the discussion a checklist for subsequent use by group members to guide their choices of approaches in giving feedback to students.

## Discussion

Over the page are some of the features that often appear in the lists on both sides of the room. You may choose to use this as a handout after the session:

| Feature | Nightmare | Dream |
|---|---|---|
| Timeliness | Students receive feedback back so late they have no chance to improve, or they have lost interest in the assignment as it's in the past. | Students receive feedback back in time for them to improve their work prior to submission. |
| Legibility | Handwritten comments are scrawled on scripts which are illegible. | Students receive very clear/word processed comments they can easily read. |
| Codes | Assessors use shorthand codes and one-word comments that are difficult to interpret e.g. 'Ref', 'Explain!', 'Follow through.' | Assessor comments are fully comprehensible, linked to illustrative examples in the script and/or any codes are explained in an appended glossary. |
| Tone | The language used comes across as hostile and derogatory. | The comments are framed in ways that make the students feel that the assessor is genuinely interested in helping them to improve. |
| Orientation | Comments are critical of the person rather than the assignment. | Comments focus on the quality of the work. |
| Purpose | Assessors identify all of the errors in a piece of work without offering suggestions for remediation. | Comments are designed to transform the student output to make it much better by being very specific about how to enhance it. |
| Extent | Comments are minimal or entirely absent. | Comments are sufficiently detailed to enable students readily to recognise how to improve the quality of their work. |
| Consistency | A few students get really detailed comments, others get little or nothing. | All students (including the most capable) receive comments that describe elements of the work, evaluate its quality and propose ways to improve it. |
| Transparency | Students can't see a clear relationship between the comments made and the mark awarded. | The comments clearly explain how the marks match the criteria and show how the judgments of the quality of the work have been made. |
| Clarity | Students reading the comments have no idea what they need to do to get a better mark. | Students reading the comments can see the justice of the comments made and how they match up to the criteria, so they can improve work before submission. |
| Self-efficacy | Students feel worse when they've read the comments and their confidence is diminished. | Praise as well as advice on how to improve means that students have something to celebrate and feel motivated to read and engage with the comments. |
| Highlights strengths | Students remain in the dark about the strengths of their work. | Students can see from your comments what they've accomplished effectively, so they can be sure to do this again in future work. |

## Further reading

Brown, S., & Race, P. (2012). 'Using effective assessment to promote learning'. In L. Hunt, & D. Chalmers (Eds.), *University Teaching in Focus: a learning-centred approach* (pp. 74-91). Victoria, Australia, Acer Press, and Abingdon: Routledge.

Walker, M. (2013). Feedback and feedforward: student responses and their implications. In S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, & M. Taras (Eds.), *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY