**Making students learn more while decreasing teacher time:**

*Using exemplars and peer feedback to make students understand and use the relevant quality criteria*

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*Introduction*

Feedback is a very important tool in learning (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Many teachers are aware of the importance of feedback, but struggle with the effort it takes to give all students personal feedback or experience that students not always make the best use of the feedback they receive. Below we’ll dive a little deeper in this dilemma and will give a method that will help students get useful feedback and at the same time will make them understand and use the feedback more.

*Why do students not use the feedback?*

One of the reasons is that the feedback is received too late. If the time between handing in an assignment and receiving feedback is too large, students’ minds will not be with the assignment and thus it will require a lot of effort for the student to realize what the feedback is all about. Although spaced practice is a powerful learning tool (Ambrose et al, 2010; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020), this does not work for late feedback as the students will most likely not engage with the feedback.

Another reason is that sometimes the students just do not understand the feedback. Either because we assume that the students will understand the full complexity of our short feedback, or because the students do not understand the quality criteria we are referring to with our feedback. And if they do not understand the feedback, it is not possible for them to act upon it.

*Should the teacher always give feedback?*

The simple answer to this is ‘no’. Not always.

As teacher you are the expert on the topic and thus can give very good feedback. As you see so many things that can be improved, you run the risk of giving too much feedback (with the result the student is overwhelmed) and/or use expert language the student does not completely understand (e.g. ‘be more critical’ has a different meaning for academics then to most students).

As indicated above, if feedback is rather late, chances are high that students will not act upon it. Giving individual feedback takes time, especially with large student numbers. Handling the shortage-of-time-issue by giving general feedback to the whole group does not completely solve this either, as students might feel ‘this is not about me’, and thus will not look at the feedback. Using student assistants to give the feedback only partly shortens the time between handing in the work and getting the feedback, and in the current times it is doubtful whether you can use student assistants at all.

*Suggestion: use exemplars and peer feedback*

Learning is hard work – by the learner. This means that the students should do the most work. This is especially true for feedback. ‘Feedback should be more work for the receiver than for the giver’ as Dylan Wiliam already mentioned. So how can we make that work?

A good method that helps students understanding the quality criteria, giving and receiving feedback and understanding it in relation to the quality criteria used while simultaneously decreasing the workload of teachers is the combination of exemplars and peer feedback. The method consists of 3 steps, 2 of which you do in class.

The strength of this method is that students have to give feedback first, and then immediately after receive feedback on their own work. Chanski & Ellis (2017) have shown that *giving feedback* has the largest positive learning effect.

So how does this method work?

Step 1: let students discuss exemplars

Exemplars are examples of the assignment you want students to do, like a report or a lab journal. In the first session you give the students two examples (often anonymized work of previous cohorts of students; make sure you ask permission!) – one which you think is of good quality and one of which you think is of lesser quality. In couples the students compare these examples and discuss which one they think is of better quality and why. The discussion in couples is important, as the students will argue their opinion. You then ask the opinion of the students and let them give their arguments why one example is better than the other example – do this plenary so all students will hear and will participate in the discussion. The students’ arguments can be easily translated into quality criteria, which you will note on a black/white board so the class can see this list. Often the students will come up with a list of criteria similar to the list you have in mind. The advantage of this method is that the students themselves have defined the quality criteria and will feel way more connected to it.

If students ‘forget’ one of your criteria, you can add these (‘I find this criterium important too’).

Step 2: let students make the assignment at home

As before, you let the students work on the assignment and prepare this for the next session. You can point them to the list of quality criteria you designed together in the first session.

Step 3: students bring the assignment to class and give peer feedback

At the start of this session, students hand in their work on the assignment they did at home. You randomly distribute the work to the students. Then the students evaluate the work using the list of criteria you collectively designed in the first session. Students have to give feedback on the work (let them write the feedback on it), by giving tops and tips: what is good (and why) and what can be improved including a suggestion how to do that. Including both tops and tips is important, as students want to hear what is already good and need to get suggestions how to improve something.

The feedback can be given anonymously or with the name of the author included; the latter offers students the opportunity to ask for clarification when they do not understand the feedback but it also has the risk that the students will be less honest in giving feedback, as they might not want to be seen as ‘that critical peer’.

After a certain amount of time but before the end of the session you collect the work with feedback, and give it back to the original author.

*The advantages of this method are fivefold:*

1. students design the quality criteria themselves, thus feeling more connected to these

2. students see an example of a peer, showing them another way of doing the assignment

3. students have to apply the quality criteria when giving peer feedback, which will lead to a better understanding of these quality criteria

4. students will receive feedback on their own work while they are still thinking about it, which in turn increases the chance they will act upon it as they understand the feedback

5. it will save you a lot of time giving feedback to all students’ work, while the students still get feedback and learn.

*Practical tips:*

- students might say that they prefer the teacher’s feedback, maybe even argue that you are being paid to give them feedback and they do not want to do your job. As a result, they might not take giving peer feedback seriously. To prevent this from happening, it helps when you explain from the beginning why you use this method which is to make them learn and understand and apply the relevant quality criteria.

- not all students might be as serious in giving feedback. It is therefore important that you instruct them to give and tops (what is good) and tips (what can be improved and how). In addition, you could have a quick check of the feedback given before returning it to the students.

- when you want to implement this method in your course, it might be good to discuss your ideas with the educational advisor in your faculty, to get additional suggestions on what works best in your situation.

*Additional suggestions.*

\* This method works well for all kinds of assignments, and especially well when students have to do similar assignments with the same criteria. You can then choose to focus on a subset of criteria for assignment 1 and another subset for assignment 2. That will decrease the workload per session and with the combination of assignments all criteria will be discussed and applied.

\* As comparison is such a strong learning tool, you could also ask the students to hand in two examples of their work (in step 3). When you distribute the work, make sure that every student gets the work from two different students. They then compare these two examples and give feedback on both. At the end of the session, every student gets their own two examples back, including feedback from two different peers. They can then compare the feedback and decide for themselves which feedback is most useful. This duo-feedback also limits the chance that students will say ‘this feedback from my peer is useless’.

\* In many technical programmes, students have to write lab journals. This method can also work for writing lab journals. You could start the first session by giving the students two examples of lab journals, and asking them to use these lab journals to do the experiment while reading and comparing both exemplars. At the end of the first session you can discuss the experiences of the students and let them explain which lab journal helped them most in doing the experiment and why. This discussion can then be used to distil the criteria for a good lab journal.

In follow up practicals where students have to write a lab journal, you could use step 3 of the method described above.

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