

# Using *e*VALUate to improve student learning

## 5. Providing feedback for student learning

The fifth item in *e*VALUate asks students their level of agreement with this statement:

***Feedback on my work in this unit helps me to achieve the learning outcomes.***

*Feedback includes written or verbal comments on your work.*

This document aims to assist teachers to provide students with feedback which assists students to learn.

<b>1. What is good feedback?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Communicating with your students about feedback</b> .....	<b>3</b>
2.1 Ensure your students know what you mean by feedback .....	3
2.2 Ensure they know what feedback they can expect from whom .....	3
2.3 Ensure they know the timeline for feedback .....	3
2.4 Feedback for first year students .....	3
<b>3. Ways to give feedback and manage your workload</b> .....	<b>4</b>
3.1 Co-opt others to give feedback .....	4
3.2. Have students assess themselves.....	4
3.3 Have students provide feedback for each other .....	44
3.4 Write a short report for the whole group of students .....	4
3.5 Drafting and polishing written assignments .....	4
3.6 Provide feedback on selected assignments .....	5
3.7 Use a computer mediated programme which provides feedback .....	5
3.8 Use a rubric or an assessment chart .....	5
<b>4. Examples of assessment rubrics</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>5. For further assistance</b> .....	<b>12</b>

## 1. What is good feedback?

*Feedback is probably the best-tested principle in psychology. [It is] ... most effective when it is timely, perceived as relevant, meaningful and encouraging, and offers suggestions for improvement that are within a student's grasp (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997).*

Feedback is any response made in relation to students' work such as an assessment task, a performance or product. It can be given by a teacher, an external assessor or a student peer. It is usually spoken or written.

Feedback is intended to acknowledge the progress students have made towards achieving the learning outcomes of a unit. Good feedback is also constructive, and points students to ways in which they can improve their learning and achievement. Providing a mark or a grade only, even with a brief comment like "good work" or "you need to improve" is rarely helpful. Here are more examples of unhelpful feedback (Chamberlain, Dison & Button, 1998).

Unfocused comments:

- "Confused"
- "Generally sound"
- "Adequate"
- "Careful how you begin your sentences."

Dismissive, sarcastic comments:

- "Did you experiment to find all this?"
- "Most of this is straight out of the book."

Comments that 'pass the buck':

- "You need help with your English."
- "See an academic skills advisor."

Comments sending mixed messages:

- "Text is based on only a few readings and not on your own thinking."
- "Follow your own advice."

Good feedback is focused and students have an opportunity to act on the feedback Hillocks (1986). It is well developed, text specific ("*What's your main point here? If it's that you disagree, put that idea up front and explain.*" (Lunsford, 1997) and provides clear direction: ("*Consider integrating these ideas.*" And "*Be more specific. Say where and when.*" (Chamberlain, Dison & Button, 1998)

Feedback needs to be timely: given early in a unit, or promptly after assessment tasks, so that students have sufficient opportunity to use the feedback for improving subsequent performance.

When approaching the point of feedback, (mentally) ask three things of the student and use these to frame your feedback:

- What were you trying to do?
- How did you do it?
- Why did you do it that way?

In general, to give useful feedback:

- Keep the time between the task and the feedback short
- When using criteria or checklists for formative marking, keep the criteria clear and simple
- Balance the positive with the negative

- Indicate how the student can improve
- Avoid sarcasm
- Use simple language

## 2. Communicating with your students about feedback

### 2.1 Ensure your students know what you mean by feedback

Be very clear with students that your role as a teacher is not to spoon-feed them, and not to “make them do things”, but to make their learning possible (Ramsden, 1992). Your role is to inform, question, prompt, assess, encourage and guide your students to achieve the learning outcomes. At Curtin, unit learning outcomes are intellectually challenging, observable and measurable, and made very explicit in the unit outline. They are what students are expected to know, understand or be able to do in order to be successful in a unit.

Let your students know that a large part of your role is to provide feedback on their progress towards achieving the learning outcomes. Be very specific with them about how much and what form of feedback they can usually expect, and when. This will be largely determined by your discipline, and the assessment tasks you have designed.

### 2.2 Ensure they know what feedback they can expect from whom

You might indicate to students, for example, that for an essay or report writing task, they will receive formal written feedback as well as a mark or grade, and that they are welcome to make an appointment with your (or their tutor) for verbal feedback if required. Or, in clinical, laboratory or artistic performance tasks, you might inform students that feedback will be ‘on the spot’ and verbal, and that they need to be prepared for this—by taking notes, asking questions and seeking advice as needed.

Make it clear to your students that feedback may come from others as well. For example, you may let students know that they will have two opportunities to demonstrate a particular skill (in performance). The first time, they will receive feedback from a student (or group of students). The second time, they will receive feedback from a teacher or tutor or workplace assessor.

### 2.3 Ensure they know the timeline for feedback

Students need prompt feedback. It is good practice, when you set a written assignment task, to inform students as to when their work will be returned to them. For example, if the due date is week three of semester, indicate that they can expect their work to be assessed and returned to them by week five. If you are unavoidably late returning their work, consider giving them all an extension on the submission date of their next assignment— but do this in plenty of time, and make sure every student is aware of and agrees with the extension (to change the due date of an assignment, you need the agreement of at least 50% of the enrolled students).

### 2.4 Feedback for first year students

First year students in particular need early feedback on their performance (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). It is a good idea to set a small assessment task which can be assessed fairly quickly so that these students have an indication of their level of performance, and their chances of success in their units. It may also help first year students to settle more quickly if they have to submit an assignment by week three of semester.

### 3. Ways to give feedback and manage your workload

#### 3.1 Co-opt others to give feedback

You may be able to ask colleagues or industry peers to assess student work, or to provide a few sentences of feedback. This would give you an opportunity to be sure of your judgements. If payment is involved, and funds are scarce, consider doing something ‘in kind’—performing a reciprocal task for them as payment. Have students assess each other’s work and give hints and tips.

#### 3.2. Have students assess themselves

Questions that help a student to self-assess are:

- What have I been doing?
- How have I been doing it?
- What do I think of what I have been doing?
- How could I improve my approach?

#### 3.3 Have students provide feedback for each other

Require students to provide assistance for later cohorts performing a similar task (such as an experiment). Use sentence beginnings such as:

- Two things to watch out for during this experiment ...
- Problems I encountered during this experiment and what I did to overcome them were ...
- Mistakes that I wish I had avoided ...
- Two things that are worth doing before the lab session are ...
- Safe and acceptable shortcuts are ...

You could collate and store these hints and tips on a discussion board, website or wiki (see [http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/LEARNING\\_matters/05october/new.html](http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/LEARNING_matters/05october/new.html)). Research indicates that students can make fairly valid assessments of quality and performance (Boud, 1995). More able students tend to award marks closer to a teacher’s assessment – although they tend to under-rate themselves. Less able students are more likely to over-rate others and themselves. Hence, some moderation might be needed.

#### 3.4 Write a short report for the whole group of students

In addition to brief comments on student work, issue all students with group feedback—common errors and how they are addressed. This also gives students an indication of where they are in relation to others.

#### 3.5 Drafting and polishing written assignments

This sounds like more work but it isn’t, and it is a very effective learning tool in improving writing. When you set a written task—an essay or report—have students submit their first draft (for half the marks, so they take it seriously). Provide detailed guidelines (or use a rubric) for improvement (for example: “your spelling and sentence structure need attention” or “you have discussed xyz—consider also pqr”).

The students' task is then to use your guidelines to make the improvements, and then to resubmit their work (with the first corrected draft attached) for the remainder of the marks. When you are correcting this version, focus particularly on the improvement you suggested in the first draft.

### 3.6 Provide feedback on selected assignments

This can be implemented in a variety of ways:

- Provide feedback on all the assignments but take the best two or three assignments of a larger set to count towards the module or course mark. A few students may do only the number required for submission. That is their choice.
- Use for summative assessment one fixed assignment that everyone must do plus the two best assignments of each student.
- Use the first assignment, which will be marked in detail, as feedback. This task must be done as a pre-requisite to submitting the assignments that will be counted towards assessment. Comment on this assignment in a way that will help students improve their subsequent coursework. Again, a student may tackle the first assignment in a desultory way but that is his or her choice.
- Students must submit a brief set of assignments before they submit the assignment or written paper that will be assessed. Assign a 'mark' to the brief assignments so students will have some idea of its worth. Detailed feedback on the briefer assignments might be given. One can develop a system whereby the briefer assignments feed into the major dissertation or paper that is marked summatively.

### 3.7 Use a computer mediated programme which provides feedback

More and more assessment tasks are automated, albeit often at a fairly unintuitive level. You can create quizzes within WebCT or Blackboard, or you can have students perform self-testing through the Computer Assisted Assessment Lab on the Bentley campus (Contact Dr Leith Sly on 9266 2291). Many text books are now accompanied by compact disks or websites which provide quiz facilities. If you do use an automated quiz, select or create one which tries to give students more than right and wrong answers. For example, if you create a quiz question, when a student selects the wrong answer, instead of having the answer say "Wrong", programme it to say "Wrong. You have probably selected this answer because you are thinking in [such and such a way]. Consider [xyz] instead".

### 3.8 Use a rubric or an assessment chart

This is one of the best ways to 'mark smarter'. In brief, a rubric is a grid in which you specify what the student needs to do in each aspect of the assignment in order to achieve a certain level. Students can self assess and you can give very rich feedback by indicating students' achievement by using the grid. For a full explanation of rubrics as an assessment tool, see Sheet 4 'Assessing student achievement of learning outcomes'.

## 4. Examples of assessment rubrics

*(These rubrics are based on examples created by Dr Shelley Yeo for the Division of Engineering, Science and Computing)*

The sample assessment rubrics provided have advantages and disadvantages. Your department may decide on one particular model to use or you may choose the model most suited to each assessment task. You might also wish to modify these assessment rubrics to suit the requirements of the particular task.

The assessment rubric provides details about how different elements of a piece of assessed work will be marked. It serves to:

- Guide students in preparing an appropriate submission by directing their learning to what is important;
- Show students the relative worth of different components, skills or learning outcomes;
- Enable students to self-assess; and
- Enable the assessor to quickly and efficiently provide general feedback to students.

Marks and weighting should be consistent with University policy.

### ASSESSMENT RUBRIC 1:

This chart provides basic feedback to students on a short problem or calculation assignment.

Element	Satisfactory.....Unsatisfactory
<i>Number of problems attempted</i>	←—————→
<i>Work is clear, concise and set out according to guidelines</i>	←—————→
<i>Accuracy of solutions</i>	←—————→
<i>Comments on validity of solutions</i>	←—————→

Notes on Assessment Rubric 1:

- Enter your own elements in column 1 if these are not appropriate.
- The fourth element might be used if students have been asked to comment on whether their answers appear reasonable or not.
- When marking, enter a tick somewhere on the arrowed lines.
- The arrows could be omitted and a tick entered under either satisfactory or unsatisfactory.
- You could provide marks for these elements in addition to a mark for ‘working’ shown.

**ASSESSMENT RUBRIC 2:**

This chart provides basic, general feedback to enable a student to diagnose his or her relative strengths and weaknesses on each of the elements of the assessment.

Element	Weighting	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Quality of Introduction or Background	15%					
Technical content – analysis, use of theory	30%					
Quality of interpretation/ discussion of results	25%					
Conclusions	10%					
Quality of overall presentation of report	20%					

**Notes on Assessment Rubric 2:**

- Enter your own elements in column 1 if these are not appropriate.
- Enter your own percentages in column 2.
- When marking, enter a tick at the appropriate position (excellent – unsatisfactory) in the table for each element. Do not enter marks or grade letters in this table.
- A disadvantage of this assessment chart is that it does not tell students what the expected standards or outcomes are.

**ASSESSMENT RUBRIC 3:**

This chart provides sufficient feedback to students so that they know, ahead of time, what the expected learning outcomes (achievements) are and how well they subsequently demonstrated these outcomes.

Outcome	Achievement	Standard		Mark
		Excellent	Unsatisfactory	
1	Understood that science is a human activity framed within historical contexts and is carried out by practitioners from widely varying backgrounds and interests.	←           →		/5
5	Used logical reasoning in the design of the poster to produce an aesthetic layout and visually interesting presentation	←           →		/5
6	Used Curtin's library resources and online technologies to conduct search for information to create the poster.	←           →		/2
9	Communicated in a clear and concise manner about the poster appropriate to purpose and audience.	←           →		/3

Notes on assessment rubric 3:

- This is intended for a learning outcomes-focused task.
- Enter details about learning outcomes to be demonstrated in columns 1 and 2.
- Enter the relative weightings in the last column (if required).
- When marking, place a tick somewhere along the spectrum. The middle point is equivalent to ‘good’ on assessment chart 1.
- The graded scales/continua are not intended to correspond to marks scales but to indicate the spectrum of excellent to unsatisfactory achievement. Students may misinterpret this. If the scales are intended to correspond to particular marks, such marks should be added to each scale (or at least highest and lowest mark inserted).

**ASSESSMENT RUBRIC 4:**

This detailed assessment chart is intended to provide sufficient feedback so that students know, ahead of time, what the expected standards are and subsequently, how well they performed against these standards.

Element	Excellent		Unsatisfactory	Weight	Mark
Introduction or background	Well researched. Good coverage.  Clear, concise and appropriate writing style.	←           →	No introduction. Limited background information.  Little evidence of research. Irrelevant or wrong information.	15%	
Technical content	Understanding of theory evident. Theory related to problem coherent. Data presented in clear and appropriate format.	←           →	Poor understanding of theory expressed.  Theory not coherently linked to problem. Poor data presentation.	30%	
Interpretation & discussion of results	Interpretation of data logical and correct.  Interpretations clearly explained. Results stated clearly.	←           →	Too many errors in data interpretation.  Discussion poorly constructed. Results unclear.	25%	
Conclusions	Appropriate conclusions drawn. Conclusions sufficiently detailed.  Conclusions linked back to theory.	←           →	Conclusions not supported by data.  Conclusions not explained. No links to theory.	10%	
Overall presentation	High quality presentation.  Referencing appropriate.  Grammar, spelling and syntax good.	←           →	Unacceptable presentation. Referencing inadequate or incorrect. Too many grammatical errors.	20%	

Notes on assessment rubric 4:

- This detailed assessment chart is based on assessment chart 1 but with the extreme standards of excellent and unsatisfactory made explicit.

- Enter your own elements and descriptors of ‘excellent’ and ‘unsatisfactory’ performance. Use two or three descriptors.
- When marking, place a tick in an appropriate place along the spectrum. You might also circle some of the descriptors to indicate a student’s relative strengths and weaknesses.
- Weightings and/or individual elements marks do not need to be included, but this will reduce the amount of feedback to students.
- Students might be asked to self-assess by placing a tick/cross on the spectrum for each element before handing the work in. This increase feedback to the staff member, helping them to understand more about their students. It also makes students more aware of the assessment criteria.
- The graded scales/continua are not intended to correspond to marks scales but to indicate low to high achievement. Students may misinterpret this. If the scales are intended to correspond to particular marks, such marks should be added to each scale (or at least highest and lowest mark inserted).

### ASSESSMENT RUBRIC 5:

This is intended for assigning marks for individual students’ contributions to group assessment. It is one model only – in which the group collaboratively assigns the students’ marks according to clear guidelines. Each group must be given a group mark that is determined by the quality of whatever the group has produced or performed. Students then get a mark based on this, depending on the quality of their contribution to the group-working process. The staff member simply validates the groups’ decision. This assessment regimen, however, requires on-going student support and guidance, and should be implemented with care.

Students are given three pages – a coversheet, a sheet outlining the criteria for individual student contribution to the group and a sheet on which each group calculates the marks for each student in the group.

This model is based on Heathfield, M. (1999). Group-based assessment: An evaluation of the use of assessed tasks as a method of fostering higher quality learning. In S. Brown & A. Glasner (Eds.), *Assessment matters in higher education. Choosing and using diverse approaches* (pp. 132-145). Buckingham, UK: SRHE and Open University Press.

#### Sheet 1: (Main coversheet)

The following declaration should be inserted in place of the one for individual students:

**DECLARATION:** By signing below, we agree that we have read and understood Curtin’s policy on plagiarism and collusion and attest that the submitted work is that of the members of this group only.

Awarded group mark = ..... (*provided by instructor*)

Final marks and signatures of participating group members:

Student Name	ID Number	Final Mark	Signature

**Sheet 2:**

What is your contribution to the work of your group?

Instructions: Each student in the group must complete this sheet and award themselves a mark for each criterion (self-assessment). You must be prepared to justify or provide evidence for the mark you allocate yourself. Other students in the group may challenge this mark. Take the sheet to the final group-mark allocation meeting.

Name:.....

Worth 10 marks	Worth 0 marks	Justification for mark	Mark
<b>Regular attendance at group meetings</b>			
<i>Attended all meetings, stayed to agreed end, worked within timescale, active and attentive, prepared to be flexible about meeting times.</i>	<i>Missed several/most meetings, always or often late, left early, digressed, giggled, day dreamed or gossiped most of the time.</i>		
<b>Contribution of ideas for the task</b>			
<i>Thought about topic before meeting, provided workable ideas that were taken up by the group, built on others' suggestions, and were prepared to test out your ideas on the group rather than keep quiet.</i>	<i>Didn't come prepared. Didn't contribute any ideas. You tended to reject others' ideas rather than build on them.</i>		
<b>Researching, analysing and preparing material for the task</b>			
<i>Did what you said you would do, brought materials, did an equal share of the research and helped to analyse and evaluate the material.</i>	<i>Did no research. Didn't do what you promised to do. Didn't manage your workload. Didn't get involved with the task and allowed others to provide all the material.</i>		
<b>Contribution to group process</b>			
<i>Left personal difference outside the group. Willing to review group process and tackle conflict in the group. Took on different roles as needed. Kept group on track. Willing and flexible but focused on the task.</i>	<i>Did not take initiative, waited to be told what to do. Always took the same role (leader, joker, etc) regardless of circumstances. Created conflict. Were not prepared to review group processes.</i>		
<b>Supporting and encouraging group members</b>			
<i>Keen to listen to others, encouraged participation. Enabled a collaborative learning environment, sensitive to issues affecting group members. Supported group members with special needs.</i>	<i>Sought only to complete the task. Spoke over others and ignored their opinions. Kept ideas and resources to yourself. Insensitive to individuals' needs and did not contribute to the learning process.</i>		
<b>Practical contribution to end-product</b>			
<i>Willing to try doing new things. Not hogging the tasks, made a high level contribution. Took own initiative. Was reliable and produced high standard work/presentation.</i>	<i>Not willing to take on any task. Did not take any responsibilities. Were unreliable so others felt the need to keep checking up. You made a limited, poor-quality contribution.</i>		

**Sheet 3:**

Group peer-assessment sheet for ... <insert subject name> ... students

Instructions: This sheet is designed to divide a group mark between members of a group based on their contribution to the task.

You should start on the other side of this page with a self-assessment. Individually, students should award themselves a mark out of 10 for each of the six categories. The criteria are there to help you decide what you deserve. Use the empty box to note the reasons why you feel your contribution was worth that mark. When you have completed the self-assessment sheet, the group should have a meeting to discuss the self-assessments and agree each person's mark for each category. This is then their 'peer-assessed' mark.

We think that it is very difficult for all group members to make exactly the same level of contributions, so the totals (#) for each student should not be the same unless you attach a short statement explaining why. Your group should submit the final group grid accompanied by each individual's self-assessment.

Categories	Names of group members					
	1	2	3	4	5	
	Peer-assessed marks					
Regular attendance at group meetings	4	8	6	5	9	
Contribution of ideas for the task	7	3	4	9	8	
Researching, analysing and preparing material for the task	8	7	6	8	8	
Contribution to cooperative group process	6	5	9	10	10	
Supporting and encouraging group members	2	4	9	8	6	
Practical contribution to the end product	5	8	8	7	8	
<b>Total for each student (#)</b>	32	35	42	47	49	<b>Total for group (205)</b>

Each student's mark is calculated by dividing their total (peer-assessed) mark (#) by N, and multiplying by the awarded group mark. N is found by dividing the total (peer-assessed) group mark (X) by the number of students in the group.

Example: A group of five is awarded a group mark of 60%. The peer-assessed total for the group (X) is 208 (from the grid);

$$\text{Hence } N = \frac{205}{5} = 41$$

If Jane gets a peer-assessed score (#) of 32, her final percentage mark is:

$$\frac{32}{41} \times 60 = 48\%$$

If Sue gets a peer-assessed score (#) of 49, her final percentage mark is:

$$\frac{49}{41} \times 60 = 75\%$$

## 5. For further assistance

Teaching development staff are available for help with individuals or teams.

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### Resources to help you

A range of resources to help you to develop strategies to improve items which have been identified as needing improvement, are available from the eVALUate website, or alternatively a hard copy can be forwarded to you by Terri Crowe (x2305 or [T.Crowe@curtin.edu.au](mailto:T.Crowe@curtin.edu.au)). Resources are available for each of the following items of the eVALUate questionnaire.

1. **Communicating clear learning outcomes**
2. **Creating engaging learning experiences**
3. **Creating effective learning resources**
4. **Assessing student achievement of learning outcomes**
5. **Providing feedback for student learning**
6. **Improving student perceptions of workload**
7. **Improving student perceptions of teaching quality**

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