Feedback in Practice: Developing Student Critical Self-Evaluation

The feedback cycle connects teaching, learning, and assessment. This resource document is intended to contextualise the role of feedback in enhancing student learning at Trinity. It outlines key theoretical and practical implications underpinning the provision of learner-focused feedback at Trinity.

When framed as a once-off action, feedback can act as a judgement/evaluation of the 'quality' of a piece of work at that moment in time. Feedback in this vein can tend to be 'monodirectional', often coming from an academic. This approach to feedback is typically encountered in high-stakes assessment contexts and is underpinned by the need to assess student learning for certification and quality assurance purposes.

Feedback, however, is a process as well as an act. In a process view, feedback is situated within student learning. Its main role is in enhancing future student learning: feedback (or 'feedforward') on a piece of work informs future practice and/or future work. Feedback in this view is dialogic: the quality of work produced develops through dialogue with self and with others (Nicol, 2010).

Students need to develop insight into their own role and agency in the feedback process: feedback is not something 'done to students' by academics. Feedback can come from many (overlapping) directions. Peer review, peer assessment tasks, self-appraisal, and critical reflection are all forms of feedback that can be used to support student learning and reduce student dependency on academics. Students should be able to interpret feedback and then 'do something with it': analyse it, ask questions about it, discuss it with others, and connect it to their prior knowledge (Nicol, 2010; Carless et al 2011; Price & Millar, 2011). Both as an act and as a process, feedback can be conceived as a 'gift' to be given/received/passed on. It is worth noting that, for students, engaging with feedback can be uncomfortable and/or provoke an emotional response.

Feedback may take place in formal contexts, e.g as written notes on an assignment, grade comments on an exam paper, voice notes on a digital document, or as a highlighted rubric. More informally, it may happen in e.g. the shape of 'are you sure about that?' questions in teaching events. In both cases, the function and purpose of feedback is to encourage and drive the development of a learner's internal sense of 'quality' as appropriate to their own context. In a process view, feedback should be 'actionable' in a way that enhances future learning or practice: feedback should enable students to develop critical perspectives on their own work.

Feedback: Key Principles

1. Feedback has an important role to play in enabling student learning. Feedback opportunities should be actively designed into the curriculum at programme and module level.
2. Feedback should both acknowledge 'good' practices and identify areas for improvement.
3. Feedback should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment, not on those of the student.
4. Feedback is most useful when it is specific, targeted, and actionable (e.g. focused).
5. Peer- and self-evaluation processes (e.g. peer feedback & critical self-appraisal) can be used to provide timely interventions to reduce student dependency on academics and to further student learning.
6. Academic-provided feedback on coursework e.g. assignments should be made available to students within the time frame indicated in Trinity's Return of Coursework policy.

Encouraging students to be open to and act on feedback:

1. Consider student levels of 'assessment literacy' in your own disciplinary context. Are students aware of their own need to develop critical perspectives on their own work?
2. Consider explicitly flagging informal assessor feedback as feedback – not all students are 'cue conscious' or aware of when informal feedback is being provided, particularly when feedback is orally communicated.
3. Encourage students to review assessor comments and identify positive features to carry forward to future work, rather than focusing solely on negative commentary.
4. Consider whether written feedback might be couched as 'questions for consideration' not statements, prompting the idea of dialogic feedback/feedback as feedforward.
5. Consider whether assessor comments might be perceived as focused on the individual, rather than focused on the work/artefact presented: third person statements can 'depersonalise' negative feedback and make it more accessible to students (e.g. this essay demonstrates xyz features).
6. Consider sharing an assessor 'mark-up' of a document or assignment before sharing the grade assigned to it – particularly where marking is discursive, this can be useful in terms of enhancing student capacity for self-evaluation. This may be more challenging in a digital/remote context.

Developing shared understanding of feedback in practice:

Peer-led feedback can be as impactful on the individual as academic-led feedback. 'Added value' comes from amplifying individual feedback to impact on a larger cohort of students. The decision whether or not to action feedback is that of the individual student: for it to be useful, feedback needs to be timely and targeted.

'Quality' feedback provision does not mean you need to write screeds of feedback for each individual student! Think about the role of peer and self-evaluation in encouraging students to develop their own internal checklist about 'quality' of work produced.

| Lecturer input:	Student hears:	Student Action	Peer evaluator says:	Student hears:	Student Action
Cit? *[on a script]*	???	none	Your referencing is sloppy	Footnotes are patchy	Student may check footnotes more closely against guideline footnotes.
Good! *[on a script]*	What was good?	None	This section interrogating [x] idea is really good, but I don't get the 'why bother' bit?	This section needs more work to be finished.	Tbc
!!! *[on a script]*	??	None	This is great – really clear	This is great!	Tbc

			OR This is awful – what do you mean hear?	OR Hmm maybe I missed the point here	
Muddiest point question [*in lecture*]	What did I find most challenging about that session?	Identifies topic/area to investigate further	What did you find hardest about the lecture? I still don't have a great handle on …	I wasn't the only one who found that challenging	Students compare experiences/learning and pool knowledge.

Particularly with assignment work, consider providing students with a 'frame' of prompt questions to encourage them to identify actions they might take as next steps ('feedforward'):

Identify at least one positive feature of your [assignment]. How can you carry this forward to your next [assignment]?
Identify at least one area for improvement in this assignment: what are the next steps you need to take to improve? Be as specific as possible:
Identify one element of the feedback on your assignment you found confused/unclear at first read. Clarify in your own words what this bit of feedback means to you:
How does the feedback on this assignment relate to feedback on your previous assignment? Can you see common threads or areas you need to think about?
From this assignment, identify three 'action points' to check if you've addressed before you submit your next [assignment]:
What advice would you give a student doing this assignment for the first time, knowing what you now know?
Do you know what to do next – and how to do it?

Visualising the feedback process:
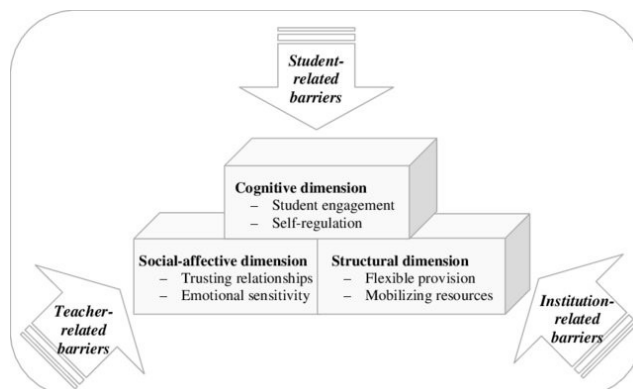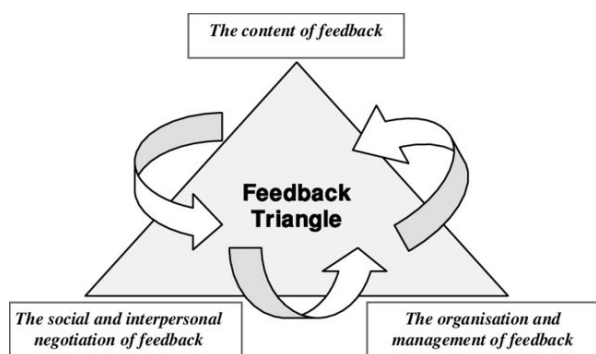
Yang, M., Carless, D., 2013. The feedback triangle and the enhancement of dialogic feedback processes. Teaching in Higher Education 18, 285–297. [287, 293].

'Feedback as Act and Practice'. Centre for Academic Practice, 2020.
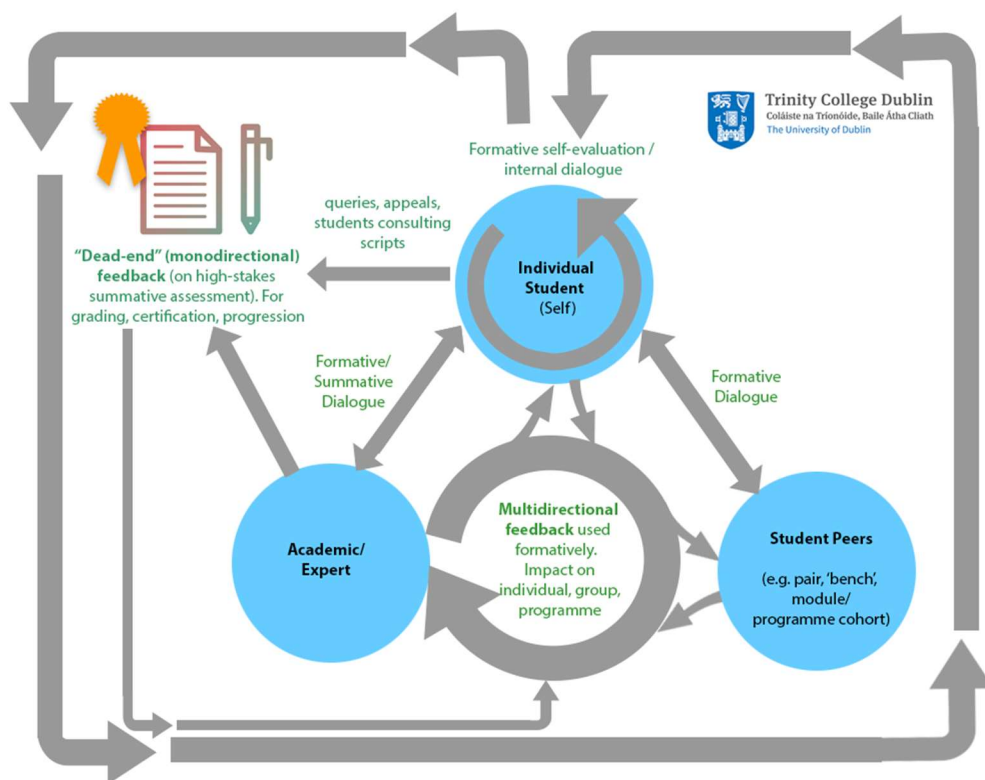
These three Academic Practice resources draw on many of the ideas outlined in the literatures of assessment and feedback, sketched out briefly in the select bibliography below:

1. Assessment for Lifelong Learning (Dr Ciara O'Farrell).
2. Developing Assignment Self-Assessment Sheets to Promote Student Learning (Dr Ciara O'Farrell/Eileen McAvoy).
3. Guide for Self-Assessment (Dr Michael Wride).

Select Bibliography

Boud, D., Molloy, E. (2013) Rethinking models of feedback for learning: the challenge of design. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 38:6, 698-712.

> This keystone article outlines key principles for thinking through the need to address feedback from the outset of curriculum design, presenting models that advocate for this view.

Boud, D. and Molloy, E. (2013). 'Decision-making for feedback', in: Boud, D. and Molloy, E. (eds.). *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*. London: Routledge, 202-217.

> The authors outline key steps that need to be taken to establish appropriate feedback practices. They question the curricular positioning of feedback, its 'timing' and the conditions required for feedback to be 'successful'.

Burgess, A. & Mellis, C. (2015). Feedback and assessment of clinical placements: achieving the right balance. Advances in Medical Education and Practice 6, 373–381.

> Embedded in a clinical context, this study aims to explore the role of feedback within clinical education, identifying the consequences of inadequate or poorly shaped feedback and providing guidelines to support student and faculty development in feedback skills.

Carless, D., Salter, D., Yang, M., Lam, J. (2011) Developing sustainable feedback practices. Studies in Higher Education 36:4, 395-407.

> The authors argue for the strong need to actively design feedback processes to make them sustainable in practice. They suggest involving students in dialogues about learning; facilitating feedback processes that develop student capacity for self-monitoring and self-evaluation; and enhancing student capacity to self-regulate and set goals.

Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004) Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education 1:1,: 3-31.

> This article focuses on the evaluation of assessment arrangements and the way they affect student learning out of class.

Nicol, D. (2010) From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 35: 5, 501 – 517.

> In the context of mass higher education, many colleagues and students feel that dialogue opportunities have been dramatically reduced. The author suggests mechanisms for enhancing feedback when student numbers are large- without increasing demands on academic staff.

Price, M., K. Handley, and J. Millar. 2011. Feedback: Focusing Attention on Engagement. Studies in Higher Education 36 (8): 879–896.

> This article advocates firmly for viewing feedback as both process and act, and embeds this in a context of how to foster a culture of student engagement with feedback.

Tuck, Jackie (2012). Feedback-giving as social practice: teachers' perspectives on feedback as institutional requirement, work and dialogue. Teaching in Higher Education 17:2 ,209–221.

> The author outlines key challenges for teaching staff when they engage in the process of predominantly written feedback, drawing on an UK-based ethnographic study. The study is unusual in focusing on lived experience of academic teachers rather than on the experience of students in how they engage in feedback dialogue.