Time well spent? : making the most of correspondence tuition

Some thoughts from the theory

Sadler, D.R. (1989) Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science***, 18, 119-144.**

An important paper that talks about feedback only being effective when it is used to close the gap between the student's work and where they are aiming for. Quotes earlier work of Ramprasad comparing feedback in systems theory to feedback on assessed tasks.

In order for this to happen, the learner has to:

- Possess a concept of the standard being aimed for, roughly the same as the teacher's, to monitor the quality of what is being produced *during the act of production itself*.
- Compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard.
- Engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap.

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

A literature review that proposes set of 'conditions under which assessment supports learning' and justifies these with reference to theory, empirical evidence and practical experience.

Conditions:

Influences of assessment on the volume, focus and quality of studying.

Condition 1: Sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time.

Condition 2: These tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocated appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course.

Condition 3: Tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind

The influence of feedback on learning.

Condition 4: Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail

Condition 5: The feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students' control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics

Condition 6: The feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance

Condition 7: Feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success

Condition 8: Feedback is appropriate, in relation to students' understanding of what they are supposed to be doing

Condition 9: Feedback is received and attended to

Condition 10: Feedback is acted upon by the student

Carless, D. (2006) Differing perceptions in the feedback process, *Studies in Higher Education***, 31 (2), 219-233.**

A study (carried out in Hong Kong) into the different perceptions of students and tutors of the assessment, marking and feedback process. Salutary reading.

Talks about student response to feedback being unpacked through three interlocking components: *discourse*, *power* and *emotion*.

Possible functions of feedback:
- Advice for improvement of the current assignment
- Advice for improvement of future assignments
- Explaining or justifying a grade
- A ritual; part of academic life

Do we know what the function of our feedback is?

Different perceptions:
- Tutors believe that they are providing more detailed feedback than students do.
- Tutors perceive their feedback to me more useful than students do.
- The perception of some tutors that students are only interested in their grades is brought into question.

Obstacles to making use of feedback:
- The comments were specific to a particular assignment
- Students wanted an immediate opportunity to act on the advice provided.
- Students couldn't understand what the tutor meant – either because they couldn't read the handwriting or because they didn't understand the comment itself. Students wanted dialogue with their tutors but were reluctant to initiate this.

Walker, M. (2009) An investigation into written comments on assignments: do students find them useful? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, **34(1), 67-78.**
A coding (by type of comment e.g. 'content', 'skills development', 'motivating' and by depth) of 3000 comments made on 106 OU (Technology) TMAs, followed up by 43 telephone interviews with the students whose assignment had been analysed.

Feedback on OU assignments can be 'retrospective gap-altering' or 'future gap-altering'.

27.2% of comments were not understood by students. Comments on content and skills development that explained as well as correcting errors did not suffer from this criticism. Students found skills development comments more usable than other categories of feedback.

Students valued positive comments on their work. An exception however was when students did not feel that the praise was merited. When a less than full mark was accompanied by unqualified praise, students were 'at best puzzled and at worst annoyed.'

Websites
The legacy website of FAST (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching), including case studies (several from the OU) about the effective use of feedback, and a link to other useful resources. At http://www.open.ac.uk/fast/

The REAP (Re-Engineering Assessment Practices) Project. At http://www.reap.ac.uk/index.html

The 'Assessment for Learning' CETL (Northumbria). At http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/ar/academy/cetl_afl/

'Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange' (Oxford Brookes). At http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/

And, for future discussion, Sally's blog 'e-assessment (f)or learning' at http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/SallyJordan/