

# ***Rethinking Formative Assessment in HE: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice.***

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## **Introduction**

This briefing paper explores how higher education institutions might use assessment more effectively to promote student learning. Assessment provides a framework for sharing educational objectives with students and for charting their progress. However, it can generate feedback information that can be used by students to enhance learning and achievement. This feedback information can also help teachers re-align their teaching in response to learners' needs. When assessment serves these purposes it is called 'formative assessment'. It is argued that formative assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning in HE and that 'feedback' and 'feed-forward' should be systematically embedded in curriculum practices.

Formative assessment aids learning by generating feedback information that is of benefit to students and to teachers. Feedback on performance, in class or on assignments, enables students to restructure their understanding /skills and build more powerful ideas and capabilities. However, the provision of feedback information is not the sole province of the teacher. Peers often provide feedback, for example, in group-work contexts, and students generate their own feedback while engaging in and producing academic work (see below). Formative assessment also provides information to teachers about where students are experiencing difficulties and where to focus their teaching efforts.

This paper summarises the research on formative assessment and feedback. It includes the following:

- ❑ A conceptual model of the formative assessment/ feedback cycle.
- ❑ Seven principles of good feedback practice: these are drawn from the model and a review of the research literature.
- ❑ Some examples of good practice strategies related to each principle.

There are two central arguments within this paper (i) that formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners and (ii) that more recognition should be given to the role of feedback on learners' motivational beliefs and self-esteem. A number of writers have argued that feedback is under-conceptualised in the

theoretical literature in HE and elsewhere, and that this makes it difficult to design effective feedback practices or to evaluate their effectiveness (Yorke, 2003; Sadler, 1998). While there has been a move over the last decade to conceptualise 'learning' from a constructivist perspective (e.g. Laurillard, 2002), approaches to feedback have, until recently, remained obstinately focused on simple 'transmission' perspectives. Teachers 'transmit' feedback messages to students about strengths and weaknesses in their work assuming that these messages are easily decoded and turned into action. In contrast, in this paper, students are assumed to construct actively their own understanding of feedback messages from tutors. Moreover, these messages are assumed to be complex and difficult to decipher (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000).

The conceptual model and the seven principles presented in this paper are intended as tools that teachers might use to analyse and improve their own formative assessment and feedback practices.

## **A Conceptual Model**

In a review article, Black and Wiliam (1998) drew together over 250 studies of formative assessment with feedback carried out since 1988 spanning all educational sectors. The studies that formed part of their meta-analysis were ecologically valid – i.e. they were drawn from real teaching situations. Black and Wiliam's analysis of these studies showed that feedback resulted in positive benefits on learning and achievement across all content areas, knowledge and skill types and levels of education. One of the most influential papers underpinning the Black and Wiliam review, and the writings of other researchers, is that by Sadler (1989). Sadler identified three conditions necessary for students to benefit from feedback. The student must:

- a) possess a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for
- b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with that goal or standard
- c) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap

Sadler argued that in many educational settings teachers give students feedback information on (b) –

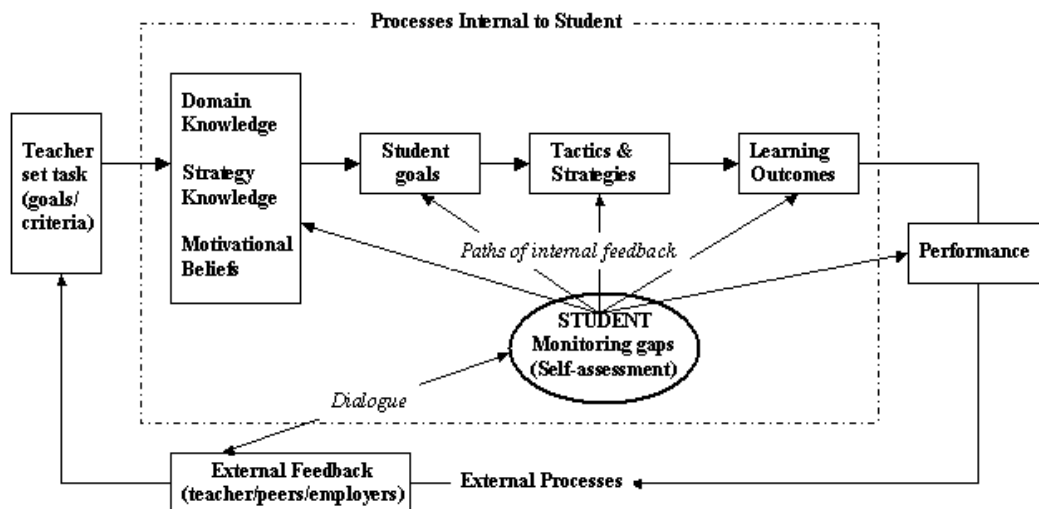
i.e. how their performance compares to the standard – but this feedback often falls short of what is actually necessary to help students close the gap. For example, such information might be difficult to understand (e.g. a comment such as ‘this essay is not sufficiently analytical’) and especially if the learning goal (a) has not been fully assimilated in the first place. Black and Wiliam (1998) further elaborate on this communication issue when they discuss the links between the way a feedback message is received and what students do with that message.

*...those factors which influence the reception of a [feedback] message and the personal decision about how to respond...[include]....beliefs about the goals of learning, about one’s capacity to respond, about the risks involved in responding in various ways and about what learning should be like (p21)*

Any model of feedback must take account of the way students make sense of, and use, feedback information. More importantly, however, is Sadler’s argument that for students to be able to compare actual performance with a standard, and take action to close the gap, then

*they must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher.* For many writers, this observation has led to the conclusion that as well as focusing on the quality of the feedback messages teachers should focus their efforts on strengthening the skills of self-assessment in their students (Yorke, 2003; Boud, 2000).

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of formative assessment and feedback that synthesises current thinking by key researchers into this topic (Sadler, 1983, 1989; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Yorke, 2003; Torrance and Pryor, 1998). The figure is based on a model of feedback and self-regulated learning originally published by Butler and Winne (1995). A key feature in the model that differentiates it from commonplace understandings of feedback is that the student is assumed to occupy a central, and active role in all feedback processes. They are always actively involved in monitoring and regulating their own performance both in terms of their goals and in terms of the strategies being used to reach those goals.



**FIGURE 1: A Model of the Formative Assessment and Feedback**

In the model, an academic task set by the teacher (in class or set as an assignment) is the starting point for the feedback cycle. Engagement with the task requires that students draw on prior knowledge and motivational beliefs and construct a personal interpretation of the requirements and properties of the task. Based on this internal conception, they

formulate their own task goals (which may be different from those of the teacher) and engage in actions to achieve these goals by applying tactics and strategies that generate outcomes. Monitoring these interactions with the task and the outcomes that are being cumulatively produced, generates *internal feedback*. This feedback is derived from a

comparison of current progress against internal goals or standards— gaps are identified (between progress and goals) and further actions are taken to close these gaps (Sadler, 1989). This self-generated feedback information might lead to a re-interpretation of the task or to the adjustment of internal goals or of tactics and strategies. Students might even revise their domain knowledge or beliefs which, in turn, would influence subsequent processes of self-regulation. If *external feedback* is provided, this additional information might augment, concur or conflict with the student's interpretation of the task and the path of learning (Butler and Winne, 1995).

In the model, external feedback to the student might be provided by teachers, peers or others (e.g. placement supervisor). However, students are always actively engaged in feedback processes. First, they generate aspects of their own feedback as they monitor performance and identify and make sense of gaps while carrying out tasks. Second, they interpret and filter feedback information from external sources. The teacher's feedback response (based on their monitoring and assessment of student performance) must be interpreted and internalised by the student before it can influence subsequent action (Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw, 2000). This has important implications for feedback processes in HE. If students are always involved in monitoring and assessing their own work, then rather than just thinking of ways of enhancing the teacher's ability to deliver high quality feedback we should be devising ways of building upon this capacity for self-regulation (Yorke, 2003).

## 7 Principles of Good Feedback Practice

From the conceptual model and the research literature on formative assessment it is possible to identify some broad principles of good feedback practice. A provisional list might include the following seven.

Good feedback practice:

1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
3. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards).
4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem .
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

The following sections provide the rationale for each principle in terms of the conceptual model and the

associated research literature. Brief examples of how these principles might be applied are also suggested.

### *1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment in learning*

Over the last decade there has been an increasing interest in strategies that encourage students to take a more active role in the management of their own learning (see, Nicol, 1997). Black and Wiliam (1998) make the argument that 'a student who automatically follows the diagnostic prescription of a teacher without understanding of its purpose will not learn' (p54) while Sadler (1989) argues that the purpose of formative assessment should be to equip students gradually with the evaluative skills that their teachers' possess. These writers are concerned that an over-emphasis on teacher assessment might increase students' dependency on others rather than develop their ability to self-assess and self-correct.

In the conceptual model, the student or learner is always engaged in *monitoring gaps* between internally *set task and personal goals* and the *outcomes* that are being progressively produced. This monitoring is a by-product of purposeful engagement in a task. However, in order to build on this process, and the student's capacity for self-regulation, teachers should create more formal and structured opportunities for self-monitoring and the judging of progression to goals. Self-assessment tasks are a good way of doing this, as are activities that encourage reflection on both the processes and the products of learning.

Research shows that direct involvement by students in assessing their own work and frequent opportunities to reflect on goals, strategies and outcomes are highly effective in enhancing learning and achievement (McDonald and Boud, 2003). Moreover, if the skills of self-assessment are developed progressively over the course of an undergraduate degree this would support a model of higher education where students are prepared for lifelong learning (Boud, 2000).

An important aspect of self-assessment involves helping students both to identify standards/criteria that apply to their work and to make judgements about how their work relates to these standards (Boud, 1986).

Examples of structured reflection and/or self-assessment are varied and might include students: (1) requesting the kinds of feedback they would like when they hand in work; (2) identifying the strengths and weaknesses in their own work in relation to criteria or standards before handing it in for teacher feedback; (3) reflecting on their achievements and selecting work in order to compile a portfolio; (4) setting achievement milestones for a task and reflecting back on progress and forward to

the next stage of action. (5) Having students give feedback on each other's work (peer feedback) also helps support the development of self-assessment skills (e.g. Gibbs, 1999).

## 2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning

While research shows that teachers have a central role in helping develop student's own capacity for self-assessment in learning, external feedback from other sources, for example, tutors or peers is also crucial. Feedback from tutors and peers provides additional information that helps challenge students to reassess their knowledge and beliefs. Teacher feedback also serves as an authoritative external reference point against which students can evaluate, and self-correct their progress and their own internal goals.

In the conceptual model (figure 1), for external feedback to be effective it must be understood and internalised by the student before it can be used productively. Yet in the research literature (Chanock, 2000; Hyland, 2000) there is a great deal of evidence that students do not understand the feedback given by tutors (e.g. 'this report is not logically structured') and are therefore not be able to take action to close the gap (i.e. he or she may not know what to do to make the report more 'logical in structure'). External feedback as a transmission process involving 'telling' ignores the active role the student must play in constructing meaning from feedback messages.

One way of increasing the effectiveness of external feedback and the likelihood that the information provided is understood is to conceptualise feedback more as a *dialogue* rather than as information transmission. Feedback as dialogue means that the student not only receives initial feedback information but also has the opportunity to engage the teacher in discussion about that feedback. This is shown in the conceptual model by the two-way arrows that link external processes to those internal to the student. The idea that feedback encourages dialogue, is considered good practice by many writers on assessment. For example, Freeman and Lewis (1998) argue that the teacher 'should try to stimulate a response and a continuing dialogue – whether this be on the topics that formed the basis of the assignment or aspects of students' performance or the feedback itself' (p51). Discussions with the teacher help students to develop their understanding of expectations and standards, to check out and correct misunderstandings and to get an immediate response to difficulties.

Unfortunately with large class sizes it can be difficult for the teacher to engage in dialogue with students. Nonetheless, there are ways that teachers might increase feedback dialogue even in these situations. For example, by reporting feedback in

class and structuring break out discussions of feedback or by using classroom technologies that collate student responses in-class and then feed the results back visually as a histogram. This feedback can act as a trigger for teacher-managed discussion (e.g. Nicol and Boyle, 2003).

Another source of external feedback are the students themselves. Peer dialogue is beneficial to student learning in a variety of ways. First, students who have just learned something are often better able than teachers to explain it to their classmates in a language and in a way that is accessible. Second, peer discussion exposes students to alternative perspectives on problems and to alternative tactics and strategies. Alternative perspectives enable students to revise or reject their initial hypothesis and construct new knowledge and meaning through negotiation. Thirdly, by commenting on the work of peers, students develop objectivity of judgement (about work in relation to standards) which can be transferred to the assessment of their own work (e.g. 'I didn't do that either'). Fourthly, peer discussion can be motivational in that it encourages students to persist and gives a yardstick to measure their own performance against (see, Nicol and Boyle 2003). Finally, it is sometimes easier for students to accept critiques of their work from peers rather than tutors.

Good examples of feedback dialogue in class include: (1) providing feedback using one-minute papers (Cross and Angelo, 1990); (2) reviewing feedback in tutorials where students are asked to read the feedback comments they have been given and discuss these with peers (they might also be asked to suggest strategies to improve performance next time); (3) asking students to find one or two examples of feedback comments that they found useful and to explain how they helped. Other ways of using feedback dialogue in a planned way, for assignments, might involve: (1) having students give each other descriptive feedback on their work in relation to published criteria before submission; (2) group projects.

## 3. Helps clarify what good performance is

Students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal, assume some ownership of it, and can assess progress (Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998). In the model (figure 1), understanding the goal means that there must be a reasonable degree of overlap between the task goal set by the student and the goal originally set by the teacher. However, there is considerable research evidence to suggest that there are often mismatches between tutors' and students' conceptions of goals and of assessment standards and criteria.

Hounsell (1997) has shown that tutors and students often have quite different conceptions about the goals and criteria for essays in undergraduate

courses in history and psychology and that poor essay performance is correlated with the degree of mismatch. In a similar vein, Norton (1990) has shown that when students were asked to rank specific assessment criteria for an essay task they produced quite different rankings from those of their teachers. Weak and incorrect conceptions of goals not only influence what students do but also the value of feedback information. If students do not share (at least in part) their tutor's conceptions of assessment goals (criteria/standards) then the feedback information they receive is unlikely to 'connect' (Hounsell, 1997). In this case, it will be difficult for students to evaluate gaps between required and actual performance.

One way of clarifying task requirements (goals/criteria/standards) is to provide students with written documents embodying descriptive statements that externalise assessment goals and the standards that define different levels of achievement. However, many studies have shown that it is difficult to make explicit assessment criteria and standards through written documentation or through verbal descriptions in class (Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003). Most criteria for complex tasks are difficult to articulate; they are often 'tacit' and unarticulated in the mind of the teacher. As York (2003) notes:

*Statements of expected standards, curriculum objectives or learning outcomes are generally insufficient to convey the richness of meaning that is wrapped up in them (York, 2003, p480)*

Hence there is a need for strategies that complement written materials and simple verbal explanations. An approach that has proved particularly powerful in clarifying goals and standards has been to provide students with 'exemplars' of performance (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2002) alongside other resources. Exemplars are effective because they define an objective and valid standard against which students can compare their work.

Strategies that have proved effective in clarifying criteria, standards and goals therefore include: (1) providing better definitions of requirements using carefully constructed criteria sheets and performance level definitions; (2) providing students with exemplar assignments with attached feedback; (3) increasing discussion and reflection about criteria and standards in class; (4) involving students in assessment exercises where they mark or comment on other students' work in relation to defined criteria and standards; (5) workshops where students in collaboration with teacher devise their own assessment criteria for a piece of work. (6) Combinations of the above five have proved particularly effective.

#### 4. Provides opportunities to close the gap

According to Yorke (2003) two questions might be asked regarding external feedback. First, is the feedback of the best quality and second, does it lead to changes in student behaviour. Many researchers have focused on the first question but the second is equally important. External feedback provides an opportunity to close the gap in the learning process between the current learning achievements of the student and the goals set by the teacher. If feedback information is not turned into action soon after it is produced then this is a missed opportunity. As Boud notes:

*The only way to tell if learning results from feedback is for students to make some kind of response to complete the feedback loop (Sadler, 1989). This is one of the most often forgotten aspects of formative assessment. Unless students are able to use the feedback to produce improved work, through for example, re-doing the same assignment, neither they nor those giving the feedback will know that it has been effective. (Boud, 2000, p158)*

In the conceptual model (figure 1), Boud's arguments about closing the gap can be viewed in two ways. First, closing the gap is about supporting students while engaged in the act of production of a piece of work. Second, it is about providing opportunities to repeat the same 'task-performance-feedback cycle' by for example allowing resubmission. External feedback should support both processes: it should help students to recognise the next steps in learning and how to take them both during production and for the next assignment.

Supporting the act of production requires the generation of concurrent or intrinsic feedback that students can interact with while engaged in an assessment task. This feedback would normally be built into the task (e.g. a group task with peer interaction is an example here) or the task might be broken down into components each associated with its own feedback. Many forms of electronic feedback can be automatically generated to support task engagement (multiple choice, FAQs). Providing feedback at sub-task level is not significantly different from other forms of feedback described in this paper.

In HE, most students have little opportunity to use directly the feedback they receive to close the gap especially in the case of planned assignments. Invariably they move on to the next assessment task soon after feedback is received. While not all work can be re-submitted, many writers argue that re-submissions should play a more prominent role in learning (Boud, 2000). In addition, the external feedback provided to students often focuses on identifying specific errors rather than providing constructive advice about how performance relates to standards and about how to make improvements in subsequent tasks; and even when corrective

guidance about how to improve is given students often do not fully understand it or know how to turn it into action.

Specific strategies to help students use external feedback to close the gap are: (1) to increase the number of opportunities for re-submission; (2) for teachers to model the strategies that might be used to close a performance gap in class (e.g. model how to structure an essay when given a new question); (3) teachers might also write down some 'action points' alongside the normal feedback they provide. This would identify for students what they should do next time to improve their performance; (4) a more effective strategy might be to involve students in identifying their own action points in class based on the feedback they have just received. This would integrate the process into the teaching and learning situation and involve the students more actively in the generation and planned use of feedback.

##### *5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.*

Another finding from the research is that a great deal of external feedback given to students is not of good quality: it may be delayed, not relevant or informative or over-whelming in quantity etc. Good quality external feedback is defined as information that helps students trouble-shoot their own performance and take action to close the gap between intent and effect. In the model (figure 1) processes internal to the student (shown by the dotted line) are strongly influenced by contextual factors in the environment over which the teacher has considerable control. The teacher sets the task, assesses performance and provides feedback. Research shows that in each of these areas there is considerable scope for improvement.

Feedback needs to be relevant to the task in hand and to student needs. Despite this, research shows that feedback information is often about strengths and weaknesses in handed-in work or about aspects of performance that are easy to identify (e.g. spelling mistakes) rather than about aspects that are of greater importance to academic learning but that are more abstract and difficult to define (e.g. strength of argument).

Students might also receive too much feedback making it difficult to decide what to act on. In the literature on essay assessment, researchers have tried to formulate guidelines regarding the quantity and tone of feedback comments. For example, Lunsford (1997) has advocated providing only three well thought out feedback comments per essay. Moreover, these comments should indicate to the student how the reader experienced the essay as it was read (i.e. playing back to the students how the essay worked) rather than offer judgemental comments. Such comments help the student to understand the difference between his or her

intentions and the effects. Comments should always be written in a non-authoritative tone and where possible they should offer corrective advice (both about the writing process as well as about content) instead of just information about strengths and weaknesses.

Other researchers have argued against following positive comments with lists of criticisms (e.g. this essay was well-structured...however...') arguing instead that descriptive information about performance in relation to defined assessment criteria is better received by students and is more likely to be acted upon.

It has become common practice in recent years to provide feedback sheets with assessment criteria as a way of informing students about task requirements and of providing consistent feedback in relation to expected goals. However, the construction of such feedback sheets does not always encourage students to engage with a task in a way desired by teachers. Sadler has argued that the use of such criteria sheets often has unwanted effects: for example, if there are a large number of criteria (12-20) they may convey a conception of an assessment task (e.g. essay) as a list of things to be done (ticked off) rather than as a holistic process (e.g. involving the production of a coherent argument supported by evidence). So as well as being responsive to student needs, teachers should also consider whether the instruments they use to deliver feedback are commensurate with the expected goals and task requirements.

Strategies that increase the quality of feedback drawn from research include: (1) making sure that feedback is provided in relation to pre-defined criteria but paying particular attention to the number of criteria; (2) providing feedback soon after a submission; (3) providing corrective advice not just information on strengths/weaknesses; (4) limiting the amount of feedback so that it is used; (5) prioritising areas for improvement; (6) providing online tests so that feedback can be accessed anytime, any place and as many times as students wish; (7) focusing on students with greatest difficulties.

##### *6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem*

How can we make assessment a positive learning experience for students? A key feature of the model of feedback (figure 1) presented in this paper is the importance attached to motivational beliefs and self-esteem. In the model, students construct their own motivation based on their appraisal of the teaching, learning and assessment context. This influences the goals that students set (personal and academic) as well as their commitment to these goals. However, research has shown that external feedback can have a positive or negative effect on motivational beliefs and on self-esteem. It influences how students feel

about themselves which, in turn, affects what and how they learn.

Many studies have shown that, contrary to expectation, frequent high stakes assessment (where marks or grades are given) can lower the motivation to learn (Harlen & Crick, 2003). Such assessments encourage students to focus on performance goals (passing the test) rather than learning goals (Elliot and Dweck, 1988). In one study, Butler (1988) demonstrated that feedback comments alone improved students' subsequent interest in learning and performance when compared with controlled situations where marks alone or feedback and marks were given. Butler argued that students paid less attention to the comments when given marks and consequently did not try to use the comments to make improvements.

Butler (1987) has also argued that grading student performance has less effect than feedback comments because it leads students to compare themselves against others (ego-involvement) rather than to focus on the difficulties in the task and on making efforts to improve (task-involvement). Feedback given as grades has also been shown to have especially negative effects on the self-esteem of low ability students (Craven, et al, 1991).

Dweck (2000) has interpreted some of these findings in terms of a developmental model that differentiates students into those who believe that ability is fixed and that there is a limit to what they can achieve (the 'entity view') and those that believe that their ability is malleable and depends on the effort that is input into a task (the 'incremental view'). These views affect how students respond to learning difficulties. Those with an entity view (fixed) interpret failure as a reflection of their low ability and are likely to give up whereas those with an incremental view (malleable) interpret this as a challenge or an obstacle to be overcome.

These motivational beliefs, however, are not immutable. In part, they depend on how teachers provide feedback. Praising effort and strategic behaviours and focusing students on learning goals leads to higher achievement than praising ability or intelligence which can result in a learned-helplessness orientation. In summary, 'feedback which draws attention away from the task and towards self-esteem can have a negative effect on attitudes and performance' (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p23).

The implication of these studies for teaching practice is that motivation and self-esteem are more likely to be enhanced when a course has many low-stakes tasks with feedback geared to providing information about progress and achievement rather than high stakes summative assessment tasks where information is only about success or failure or about how students compare with peers. Other strategies

that would help encourage high levels of motivation to succeed include: (1) providing marks on written work only after students have responded to feedback comments; (2) allocating time for students to re-write selected pieces of work – this would help change students' expectations about purpose; (3) automated testing with feedback; (4) drafts and resubmissions.

7. *Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.*

Good feedback practice is not only about providing good information to the students about learning but it is also about providing good information to teachers. As Yorke (2003) notes:

*The act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the student. Assessors learn about the extent to which they [students] have developed expertise and can tailor their teaching accordingly (York, 2003, p482)*

In order to produce feedback that is relevant and informative teachers themselves need good data about how students are progressing. They also need to be involved in reviewing and reflecting on this data and in taking action to help close the learning gap.

In the conceptual model (figure 1) information about students is provided when the learning outcomes are translated into public performances. Teachers generate this public information about students through a variety of methods – by setting assessment tasks and in-class through questioning of students and through observation. Such information helps teachers uncover student difficulties with subject matter (e.g. conceptual misunderstandings) and difficulties with study methods while carrying out assessment tasks.

Frequent assessment tasks, especially diagnostic tests, can help teachers generate cumulative information about students' levels of understanding and skill so that they can adapt their teaching accordingly. This is one of the key ideas behind the work of Angelo and Cross (1990) in the US. They have shown how teachers can gain regular feedback information about student learning within large classes by using short test-feedback cycles. These strategies benefit both the student and the teacher (Steadman, 1998) and they can be adapted to any classroom situation or discipline. Moreover, implementation allows teachers and students to share, on a regular basis their conceptions about both the goals and processes of learning (Stefani & Nicol, 1997).

A variety of strategies are available to teachers to help generate and collate quality information about

student learning and help them decide how to use it. For example: (1) one-minute papers where students carry out a small assessment task and hand this in anonymously at the end of a class (e.g. what was the main point of this lecture?; what question remains outstanding for you at the end of this teaching session?); (2) having students request the feedback they would like when they make an assignment submission; (3) having students identify where they are having difficulties when they hand in assessed work; (4) asking students in groups to identify 'a question worth asking', based on prior study, that they would like to explore for a short time at the beginning of the next tutorial; (5) quick evaluation strategies at key points in teaching.

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