Feedback and advice

1 Why give feedback?

There is a saying that practice makes perfect. It doesn't. Practice makes consistent. Feedback is what allows students to develop the ability to close the gap between current performance and professional aspiration.

2 Theory of feedback

Feedback models 1 & 2 (Boud & Molloy 2013)

Feedback model 1: engineering/cybernetics paradigm. For example, a performance thermostat. This model accords little agency or volition to students, treating them in behavioral terms as a 'black box'.

Feedback model 2: sustainable feedback equipping students to learn for themselves in the future. The main function of feedback is to develop reflective capacity.

(1) involving students in dialogues about learning which raise their awareness of quality performance;

(2) facilitating feedback processes through which students are stimulated to develop capacities in monitoring and evaluating their own learning;

(3) enhancing student capacities for ongoing lifelong learning by supporting student development of skills for goal setting and planning their learning;

(4) designing assessment tasks to facilitate student engagement over time in which feedback from varied sources is generated, processed and used to enhance performance on multiple stages of assignments.

Judgement	
Description	The trainer makes a judgement of value from a position of authority, whether praise; for example, "That's good, that's right" or criticism; for example, "That's bad, that's wrong".
Advantages	Praise can be helpful with students lacking confidence. It can be a reinforcing and supportive form of feedback when learning new skills.
Disadvantages	A power dynamic is introduced where the trainer positions herself as an expert in the trainee's work. Criticism may be taken to heart; more insidiously, praise may lead to an unhelpful dependency. The student doesn't have the opportunity to judge independently for herself whether something is good or not and cannot develop their own authentic style. At worst, judgement statements may be regarded by the student as patronising or even coercive, pushing the trainee to accept the trainer's value set. This may lead to resistance or irritation with the trainer.

Impact	
Description	The trainer describes the student's actions and then their own subjective, valuing response. The statements are 'owned' as personal reactions rather than universal judgements of merit: for example, "I was impressed when you …," or "I liked when you …" or "one thing that really seemed to me to work was when you…"

Advantages	Impact statements are personal and can build rapport. Done well they show the student that her actions have an effect on the trainer, which may lead to a more balanced relationship.
Disadvantages	Because these types of statement are personal, they may shift focus unhelpfully away from the student and towards the trainer. They are easy to misjudge and risk sounding insincere or patronising, or they may simply not resonate with the student.

Observation	
Description	This type of feedback is sometimes called 'skill spotting'. It is the objective description of the student's performance as data (and is the basis of objective schemata like the MITI). The trainer attempts to name and describe every skill used. This can enable the student to reflect on each on turn, with the aim of using the skill more consistently and broadening the scope the skill.
Advantages	The objectivity can act as a counter-balance to excessive discussion focused on deficits. The student gets the credit for her successes.
Disadvantages	This type of feedback may seem cold, clinical or removed. Often in communication skills, the scope for truly objective feedback, based on universally agreed standards, is small (though classroom debate about which standards that trainees wish to be held to can be very productive: see negotiated assessment grids below).

3 Giving feedback in practice

In a training workshop, there will be occasions when you will be either giving or receiving feedback. If there is one consistent message in MI, it is that people don't much like being told what to do and how to do it. The following thoughts are offered for considering how you might engage in this process.

The best time to give advice or feedback is when someone asks for it. When you are observing a colleague, ask what they would like feedback on and focus your attention on this aspect of their performance. One model is 'elicit-provide-elicit': start by evoking: 'what do you think you did well?'. Asking simply 'how did it go?' often produces a litany of errors and mistakes: this is not usually helpful. Listen and reflect back what you hear.

If there is something specific that you have noticed that seems potentially problematic, use a more specific question: "I noticed when you said … the patient seemed to be briefly annoyed. What sense do you make of that?". This might be followed up with more reflections. It is more likely that a clumsy intervention by the trainee is the product of lack of skill than malicious intent: asking about the intent in the statement that produced the annoyance can be productive. "it sounds like you didn't get the result you had intended. In retrospect, what might have been more helpful for the patient?"

Ideally, the bulk of the feedback should be generated from the trainee. There may be other feedback that you would like to give when you have noticed something important. Ask for permission to give it. Give the feedback, trying as much as possible to avoid value judgements, using mainly observation statements with some impact statements and few judgement statements. It is surprisingly hard to do well: judgement statements invariably creep in despite the best of intentions. "Can I tell you about something that works well for me in that situation?" or "can I offer you a different perspective?" are good framing devices for this kind of feedback.

Sometimes, if you find yourself giving the same feedback repeatedly to different people, it's a signal that *you* need to listen to this feedback yourself!

4 Blending feedback from multiple sources

A trainer may have several potential sources of feedback for a trainee in the classroom: the trainee him/herself, the rest of the class (the trainee's peers), possibly a simulated patient, a coding instrument, or the trainer him/her self and any co-trainers. Taken together, this is a rich and sometimes contradictory resource.

Debriefing and giving feedback should usually be in order of vulnerability – student first, peers second, trainers last.

It is often helpful to make a clear rule that peers can only 'skill spot': name and describe things that went well.

When using simulated patients, use questions that restricts their feedback to their competence. Questions such as "how did you feel when…" or "what were you thinking when…" are more useful than broader open questions.

5 Receiving feedback

The more able we are to be open to feedback, the more likely we are to benefit from it. To get better feedback, try to share responsibility for the process with the people in your group and ask for the kind of feedback you want on the kinds of issues that are concerning you. Aim to use feedback to clarify for yourself the gap between performance and aspiration so that you can learn to honestly appraise yourself.

Listen to the feedback all the way through without jumping to a defensive response. Ask for clarification and specific detail if you want it – or just say thank you.

Respond to it as data: the feedback you get is how one other person perceives you. It's one person's opinion and isn't the whole truth. Don't try to excuse or explain away – or at least, monitor this tendency in yourself. Try to understand the other person's perspective and conclusions: reflect on it and consider whether it might be useful to you.

The corollary of feedback being one person's truth is that it is often worth gathering feedback from multiple sources - peers, teachers, clients. Repeated themes may be informative.

5 Traps

The expert trap: it is easy to fall into the trap that the purpose of feedback is for the teacher to correct what he or she perceives as error ('Feedback mark 1, above). This is not what feedback is for: feedback aims to foster reflective capacity. Correcting the errors you see today is less important than developing lifetime learning habits.

A culture of negative feedback: In many teaching environments, students have become accustomed to the belief that in order to improve they must be given harsh, judgmental feedback of all their mistakes. This is almost certainly wrong: it is easy to weaken a student's confidence by giving them the negative feedback they request, and such feedback does nothing to develop reflective capacity. Learning to 'skill spot' and to extend and broaden areas of good practice is usually more helpful.

Dunning Kruger effect and the illusion of knowing: students can sometimes mistake familiarity with the material with skill. The extreme version of this is one part of the Dunning Kruger effect where students with few skills are unable to accurately assess their ability. Sensitive feedback to build reflective capacity can help these students.

The other part of the Dunning Kruger effect is that experts may sometimes underestimate how difficult it is to acquire and use skills. Teachers sometimes need to remind themselves of how much time and practice it took to acquire their own expertise!

6 Peer feedback: Negotiated Assessment Grids

To involve the students in conversations about standard setting, use negotiated assessment grids (NAGs).

1 Set the task, e.g. a role play or real play

2 Before starting the task, lead a discussion about what the issues in the role play and what strategies are likely to be helpful: these make the 'success criteria' for the exercise. List the success criteria on a flip chart. This is the NAG.

As a trainer, use evocative questions to get a good set of success criteria:

- what microskills might you use?
- how might you structure the encounter?
- which of the four phases of MI is likely to be key in this encounter?
- what is the minimum that you (or your organisation) needs for this encounter (e.g. a form to be filled)?

3 Run the exercise

Before running, ask the student if is there anything from the NAG they particularly want to practice. Tell them they can stop at any time and ask for help. Run the exercise. If they make a mistake or get stuck, the group brainstorms (referring to the NAG) and they re-run.

4 Debrief.

To the student: what did you do well from the NAG?

Other trainees: what skills did you see the trainee use from the NAG? Any not on the NAG? Add the new skills to the grid.

Encourage skill spotting as a high level skill to be developed.

As a teacher, consider giving one thing to think about or try - don't allow students to criticise each other.

Repeat with other students.

5 Group debrief: more open discussion about the key learning points. Consider transfer of learning back to the workplace: how will you apply what you have learned from this exercise when you get back to work?

7 Bibliography

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Ende, J., 1983. Feedback in clinical medical education. *JAMA*, 250(6), pp.777–781.