

EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE FEEDBACK

Learning can be understood as a process of gradually refining one’s understanding based on information about “how I am doing.” For this reason, feedback is an essential part of learning—it tells us where we are in the learning process and what needs to change in order to improve. In the context of university pedagogy, it is useful to distinguish between “**feedback**” as a process and “**feedback information**” as one of its inputs. Feedback operates as a **cycle**: the student receives information, compares it with expectations, and adjusts their actions accordingly.

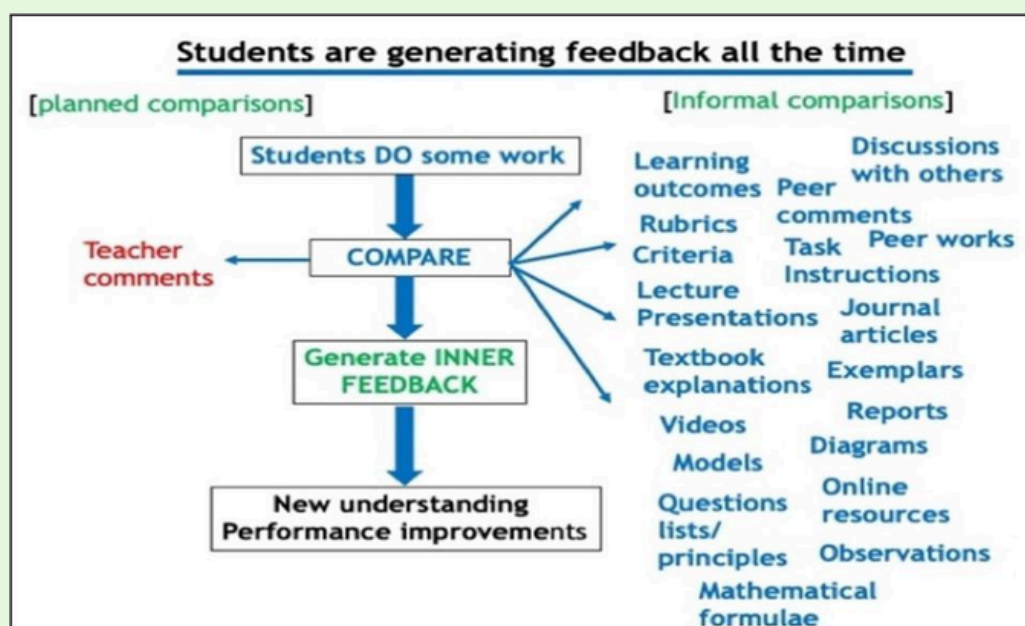
The source of this information does not have to be limited to the **teacher’s comments**; it can also come from peers’ work, assessment criteria, one’s own experience, or examples of good practice. The teacher should not merely act as a “provider of comments,” but rather design situations in which **students** can actively generate feedback **themselves**.

The feedback process is, of course, not straightforward and can be complicated by various factors. Emotions play a significant role—if feedback is perceived as threatening, the student may reject it. Other obstacles include unclear criteria or an overload of comments.

Feedback does not work if students do not understand it, do not trust it, or do not know how to use it. In some cases, it can even be harmful—for example, if it is too general, purely evaluative without explanation, or if it targets the student’s identity rather than their work.

We often invest a great deal of energy, in good faith, into detailed comments that students ultimately do not use. It may be **more effective** to focus on key aspects and to support self-assessment or peer feedback—in other words, “we don’t have to do all the hard work ourselves.” For feedback to be as effective as possible, it is necessary to develop **feedback literacy**, that is, the ability to seek out, understand, and use feedback for learning. This can be supported, for example, by encouraging students to formulate their own criteria or reflections.

For an inspiring perspective on feedback, see the work of [David Nicols](#).



THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF FEEDBACK

As one of the outcomes of our workshop on effective feedback, we tried to formulate what feedback should be like. We present the resulting five principles here. The individual characteristics are not listed in order of importance – on the contrary, they are all equally important and ideally complement one another.

FEEDBACK SHOULD BE:

1

PURPOSEFUL

Do we know why we are giving feedback?

2

DESCRIPTIVE, NOT JUDGMENTAL

We relate it to previously defined goals.

3

TIMELY

It is necessary to give recipients space to improve.

4

MOTIVATING

We try to focus feedback on the future.

5

BASED ON TRUST

Because without mutual trust, it simply doesn't work!