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THE VALUE OF FEEDBACK IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

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The reflection on feedback provided below starts with our participation in the International Conference, *Transforming Teaching Methods and Assessment in Higher Education*, held in Padua on 4-5-6 April 2016, for which we were asked to share and reflect on our experience of feedback in an academic environment.

The path taken by the group was that of sharing the members' own personal feedback experiences, and then from here, tracing the factors that make feedback effective/useful and that that make feedback ineffective/useless. The next step was to try and explain a general definition that summarised the characterising factors and to identify a metaphorical image, which represents our experience.

Personal experiences

Erika, University of Padua

Last semester, I attended a course where feedback had become a kind of “good practice.” During the course, we had to prepare two presentations to give to the class, which were followed by feedback from the teachers and from our course-mates, with the aim of highlighting strengths and areas for improvement, and also of learning to provide constructive feedback. This experience, in particular that of providing feedback to my course mates about their work, was an opportunity for reflection and growth for me, which allowed me to learn to accept feedback, first of all, without feeling judged by it, to accept it and use it to improve myself; it also allowed me to learn how to give constructive feedback, also expressing weaknesses to be improved.

Martina, University of Siena

During my university studies, I received both positive, effective feedback from my teachers, that made me think and helped me correct my ways and conduct, and also feedback that I considered negative. For example, on one occasion, a teacher pointed out that the way in which I addressed my teachers in emails was not appropriate for the type of student-teacher relationship. This comment, which was negative in a certain way, allowed me to understand my mistake and correct it. Another time, a teacher gave me positive feedback on a piece of work, pointing out my skills in using computers and technological programmes. Thanks to this positive feedback, I realised my potential and this encouraged me to follow that route and improve myself more.

Nicoletta, University of Florence

I have always imagined the feedback process as one where the result of an action returns to influence the next one, allowing people to adapt their own behaviour according to two elements: their aims and

the set of rules that “regulates” interactions in a given environment. During my academic path, of the many pieces of feedback that I received, the ones that highlighted these characteristics were the ones from teachers during essay assessments that I submitted over the years. In particular, through dialogue with my supervisors, I learned to not mistake quantity of feedback with quality, to note the difference between advice that was useful for correction and explanations about the reasons that motivate the need for said corrections, to give priority to feedback on substantial aspects of the work, working to develop my research skills, but not neglecting to adapt the stylistic and formal aspects to the standards required by the type of communication used. The teachers’ ability to guide me in this process, underlining the tools and skills that I already possessed, encouraged me to do better and allowed me to think about the importance that understanding contexts holds in all human activities.

Feedback: the characterising factors

Sharing personal experiences was an essential starting point that helped us to identify and explain the main factors that are characteristic of effective, useful feedback and those that, to the contrary, are typical of ineffective, useless feedback.

The feedback experiences in an academic context that we shared were mainly positive: we remembered moments when the feedback received was vital for improving ourselves, for giving us direction in achieving our goals and to become aware of aspects that we didn’t know about. Also, feedback was also a gratifying moment for us, and also one of acknowledgement and extremely encouraging personal achievement. We also shared some negative experiences that were unsatisfactory and disappointing for us, and thinking of them was extremely useful in defining the characterising factors of bad feedback.

We realised that during our life at university, there were not many times when we received useful, effective feedback about something we produced or our performance, in spite of the fact that it was perceived as being extremely useful, even when the feedback was not exactly positive.

The feedback moment is essential for a student’s growth as it favours self-awareness, increases learning possibilities and improves performance. Also, feedback increases motivation and the sense of self-efficacy, by reinforcing positive conduct and aspects. This is why it is important to increase the opportunities for feedback in the academic world, and believe it to be a good practice to the adopted in class.

This set of goals is the result of constructive, effective feedback for which we have identified the basic characteristics.

- Effective feedback focuses on performance or a person’s product and is not centred on his personality, his character and/or ways. It is sincere, authentic and impartial, aimed at providing help and progress to the person.
- Effective feedback is contextualised and referred to a well-defined object. The more specific and precise it is, the easier it will be for the person receiving the feedback to accept it and make use of it. Also, when possible, it is a good idea to search for several points of view to have an overall richer, more detailed picture.
- Effective feedback is honest and balanced, bringing to light both positive and negative aspects. It also transforms the negative into potential, in order to support and encourage change and growth in the person.

- Effective feedback is the source of deeper awareness and learning: it provides precious ideas for learning that are important for a person’s growth and for improving his skills. Through well-formulated feedback, the person has the opportunity to become aware of what his own strengths may be, and what the strengths he has to work on are.
- Lastly, we believe that effective feedback is a promoter for a culture of in-class feedback where it can become a daily good practice.



EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK		
On performance or on the product and not on the person	Sincere	Contextualised and Multiple
Honest, on positive and negative aspects	That translates negative into potential	Source of learning and creation of awareness
	that promotes a feedback culture	

Figure 1. Slide from the presentation given on 5th April 2016: effective feedback factors

The next step was to identify and then reflect on which factors can, to the contrary, make feedback ineffective and useless.

- In our opinion, feedback is not effective when it is not based on a defined object, a person’s product or performance and instead refers to personal characteristics, giving rise to a defensive, rejecting response.
- Feedback is not useful when given in bad faith or for hidden purposes, and is not aimed at providing help to the other person.
- It is not effective when it is decontextualized, is too general and generalised, and is not effective when imbalanced and highlights the positive or the negative aspects too much. In the former case, references that are too focused on strengths can lack credibility and be excessive; in the latter case, references too focused on weaknesses can demotivate and create closure and aggression.

- Feedback is not effective when it is judgemental and is limited to pointing out what doesn't work, without revealing potential. It is not effective when it is sterile and does not have the effect of learning in the person receiving it, and when it is expressed as a judgement, thus hindering acceptance by the interlocutor.



INEFFECTIVE FEEDBACK		
Not based on performance or on the product	Given in bad faith or for hidden purposes	Decontextualized
Not balanced	Judgemental, it does not translate the negative into potential	Sterile, does not produce learning
	Judging, does not encourage acceptance	

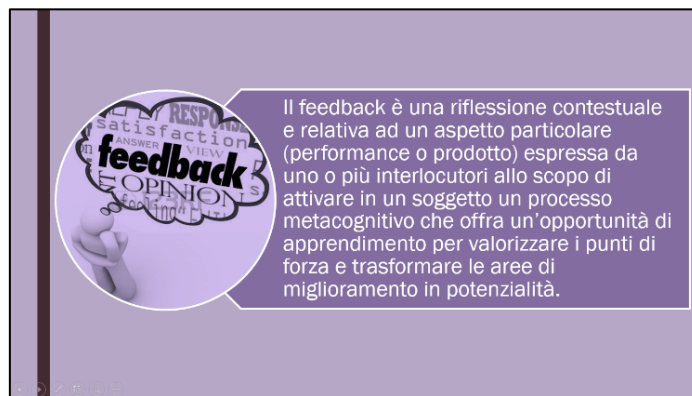
Figure 2. Slide from the presentation given on 5th April 2016: ineffective feedback factors.

Feedback: our definition

The final step in the group's reflection was to draw up a definition of feedback that represents our personal experiences and that summarises the factors identified previously. The definition, shown in fig. 3, touches the following key points.

Feedback:

- is anchored to a specific context;
- refers to a particular object (performance or product);
- can be expressed by one or more interlocutors (multiple feedback);
- offers learning opportunities to those receiving it; and
- enhances strengths and transforms "critical" areas for improvement into potential.



“Feedback is a contextual reflection, relating to a particular aspect (performance or product) that is expressed by one or more interlocutors with the aim of starting up a metacognitive process in a person that provides an opportunity for learning, to enhance strengths and transform areas for improvement into potential.”

Figure 3. Slide from the presentation given on 5th April 2016: the definition of feedback.

We believe it important to underline that effectiveness also depends on a person’s willingness to receive it. Feedback is an exchange: it implies a relationship between two people and implies the willingness to help clarify his blind points on the one hand and on the other implies the willingness to receive and accept moments of consequent learning and awareness, keeping the idea of personal criticism and judgement far away.



“Collecting feedback is only half the work: it is also necessary to act on it.

YOU ARE AN IDIOT!
 WHAT DID YOU CALL ME, IMBECILE?
 I DIDN'T SAY “IMBECILE,” I SAID “IDIOT”
 OH, I THOUGHT YOU SAID “IMBECILE” ...
 THAT’S WHAT CAUSES SO MANY PROBLEMS AMONG PEOPLE TODAY.... THEY DON’T UNDERSTAND THINGS PROPERLY!”

Figure 4. Slide from the presentation given on 5th April 2016: Final Remark

Our evocative metaphor



Figure 5. An evocative image of feedback

The metaphorical image that we have chosen is the focusing of a camera. We think that this image symbolises the focus of another person on what we do, an external point of view that allows us to notice the nuances that we were not fully aware of.

Feedback, in fact, is a comment that offers us a photograph of what is happening in a given context in constructive terms, increasing a person's awareness. Feedback is generally a possible way to favour the freedom of learning also through making mistakes.