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## ***Rethinking feedback in higher education: the role of consequential feedback***

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Imagine this: A business student managing a virtual company makes a poor decision, leading to a simulated bankruptcy. Across campus, a medical student adjusts a treatment in a patient simulation and observes improvements in the virtual patient's condition.

When students practice in a simulated real-world environment they have access to a rich set of feedback information, including *consequential* feedback. Consequential feedback provides vital information about the *consequences* of students' actions and decisions. Typically, though, in the perennial NSS-driven hand-wringing about improving feedback in higher education, we are thinking only about evaluative feedback information – when educators or peers critique students' work and suggest improvements. There's no doubt evaluative feedback, especially corrective feedback, is important. But if we're only talking about evaluative feedback, we are missing whole swathes of invaluable feedback information crucial to preparing graduates for professional roles.

In a recently published, open access [paper](#) in *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, we make the case for educators to design for and support students in noticing, interpreting and learning from consequential feedback information.

### **What's consequential feedback?**

Consequential feedback involves noticing the connection between *actions* and their *outcomes* (*consequences*). For example, if we touch a hot stove, we get burned. In this example, noticing the burn is both immediate and obvious. Connecting it to the action of touching the stove is also easy; little interpretation needs to be made. However, there are many cause-effect (action-consequence) sequences embedded in professional practice that are not so easy to connect. Students may need help in noticing the linkages, interpreting them and making corrections to their actions to lead to better consequences in the future.

For instance, the business student above might decide on a pricing strategy and observe its effect on market share. The simulation speeds up time so students can observe the effects of price change on sales and market share. In real-life, observing the consequences of a pricing change might take weeks or months. Through the simulation, learners can experiment with different pricing strategies, making different assumptions about the market, and observing the effects, to build their understanding of how these two variables are linked under different conditions. Critically, they learn the importance of this linkage so they can monitor in the messier, delayed real life situations they might face as a marketing professional.

Consequential feedback isn't just theoretical. It is already making an impact in diverse educational fields such as healthcare, business, mathematics and the arts. But the disparate literature we reviewed almost never names this information as consequential feedback. To

improve feedback in higher education, we need to be able to talk to educators and students explicitly about this rich font of feedback information. We need a language for it so we can explore how it is distinct from and complementary to evaluative feedback. Naming it allows us to deliberately practice different ways of enhancing it and build evidence about how to teach students to use it well.

### **Why does it matter?**

Attending to consequential feedback shifts the focus from external judgments of quality to an internalised understanding of cause and effect. It enables students to experience the results of their decisions and use these insights to refine their practice. Thus, it forms the grist for reflective thinking and a host of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills needed to solve the world's most pressing problems.

In “real-life” after university, graduates are unlikely to have a mentor or teacher standing over them offering the kind of evaluative feedback that dominates discussion of feedback in higher education. Instead, they need to be able to learn independently from the consequential feedback readily available in the workplace and beyond. Drawing on consequential feedback information, professionals can continuously learn and adapt their practice to changing contexts. Thus, educators need to design opportunities that simulate professional practices, paying explicit attention to helping students learn from the consequential feedback afforded by these instructional designs.

### **How can educators harness it?**

While consequential feedback is powerful, capitalising on it during higher education requires careful design. Here are some strategies for educators to try in their practice:

#### ***1. Use Simulations, Role-Plays, and Projects***

Simulations provide a controlled environment where students can explore the outcomes of their actions. For example, in a healthcare setting, students might use patient mannequins or virtual reality tools to practice diagnostic and treatment skills. In a human resources course, students might engage in mediation role plays. In an engineering course, students could design and test products like model bridges or rockets.

#### ***2. Design for Realism***

Whenever possible, feedback opportunities should replicate real-world conditions. For instance, a law student participating in a moot court can see how their arguments hold up under cross-examination or a comedy student can see how a real audience responds to their show.

#### ***3. Encourage Reflection***

Consequential feedback is most effective when paired with reflection. Educators can prompt students to consider questions such as: What did you do? Why? What happened when you did x? Was y what you expected or wanted? How do these results compare to professional standards? Why did you get that result? What could you change to get the results you want?

#### ***4. Pair with Evaluative Feedback***

Students may see that they didn't get the result they wanted but not know how to correct their actions. Consequential feedback doesn't replace evaluative feedback; it complements it. For example, after a business simulation, an instructor might provide additional guidance on interpreting KPIs or suggest strategies for improvement. This pairing helps students connect outcomes with actionable next steps.

#### **Shifting the frame**

Focusing on consequential feedback represents a shift in how we think about assessment, feedback, and learning itself. By designing learning experiences that allow students to act and observe the natural outcomes of their actions, we create opportunities for deeper, more meaningful engagement in the learning process. As students study the impact of their actions, they learn to take responsibility for their choices. This approach fosters the problem-solving, adaptability, independence, and professional and social responsibility they'll need throughout their lives.

A key question educators should be asking is: How can I help students recognise and learn from the outcomes of their actions? The answer lies in designing for and highlighting consequential feedback.