

“Could you explain what you mean by that?”

Individual Feedback Sessions (IFS)

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How I have come to offer feedback to Year 12 students in order to maximise their understanding and help them achieve their best.

One cold and dreary Wednesday afternoon during Term 1 2008, I went to our school's weekly professional development meeting. We were exploring Understanding by Design and Project Zero's Visible Thinking Routines. During the presentation one PowerPoint slide intrigued me; it discussed how the Latin root word for assessment is "assidere" which means "to sit beside".

I went home that night and thought about the idea and its implications for how I taught. I had only been teaching for one year and, while my Year 12 students had achieved 'good' results the previous year, I was eager to examine how I had taught the class and the feedback that I had offered.

In the ensuing weeks, I trialled a few models of giving feedback that centred on having a discussion with students about their pieces of writing rather than writing lengthy comments on their work. One of the problems that I had encountered with offering feedback through written comments was that I was not sure if students actually read them, understood my comments or even if they knew how to put my suggestions into action.

That is why I started the Individual Feedback Sessions (IFS)

Initial stages

At the beginning, I told students that I would like to see them to go over their work rather than write copious amounts of notes and comments on their essays. I was met with various reactions including:

- a few were happy about the chance to discuss their work and showed up, but generally they were already high achievers.
- some students made times to meet but forgot to show up.
- other students did not show up at all, and as a result were getting less feedback on their work than when I wrote comments.

Yet I persisted, aiming to see each student once a fortnight and hoping that it would all fall into place. It didn't! I was doing a combination of providing feedback through written comments and meeting with kids. Moreover, the times that I did meet up with students were ad hoc at best. My grand plans were not coming to fruition.

The end of Term 1 arrived and I knew that the system either had to work or I would have to go back to writing comments. It was then that I realised that I

had not embodied the idea behind the new system myself. What I had done was take an idea and run with it. I had just hoped that the students would

- understand where I was going
- see the benefit in the system
- feel comfortable with the system

I decided to take the holiday break to **reflect, revise and re-energise** the IFS method of working with students.

Reflect

I truly believed in the idea of sitting with students to go over their work. By creating the IFS system, I wanted to offer a more authentic and beneficial way of offering feedback. During the holidays, I came across a remark by one of my favourite authors/poets Dr Maya Angelou, *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

The sentiment behind Maya Angelou's words resonated with me and they were critical in my thinking and designing of the IFS.

Aside from trying to offer the students better and more exact feedback, I wanted them to

- trust in their abilities
- have the courage to reflect on their thinking
- view our work together as a true partnership.

Put another way, the IFS was really a huge change in how students would work within the curriculum. By changing the mode and delivery of assessment/feedback, I needed to reassess my thoughts and understanding of how the student would interact with the curriculum.

In changing to an IFS system, I hoped that the students would feel

Supported	Respected/Valued	Challenged
Confident	Creative	Collaborative
A sense of ownership towards their learning	Pro-active	Comfortable understanding the criteria for assessments

I came to realise that introducing the IFS was a matter not only a matter of logistics but also a problem of classroom culture. Largely, my students were used to a "chalk and talk" environment. I had been filtering in the use of

Visible Thinking routines but realised that I needed to have a discussion with the whole class to outline what I was hoping to achieve through the IFS.

Revise

I also knew that I had to make some changes to the IFS and I took the holidays to ensure that at the start of Term 2 the system could roll out and, hopefully, work!

Some of the changes I made were

- I devised a timetable with spaces to see each student on a weekly basis
- IFS were to be held with two students so that the pressure was taken off individuals. Hopefully students would learn from each other also.
- I decided to make it mandatory to attend and set up a system of how I would inform parents of the IFS and if their child did not attend.

Re-energise (make or break it time!)

Term 2 began with a class discussion about the best way to receive feedback, the term that was ahead and that ever present pressure of the final exam. I shared the meaning of the Latin root word for assessment and Maya Angelou's words. I also explained how I would like the final two terms of the year to work under the IFS. Overall, it took a few weeks for the students to trust in the system and see that I was genuine about the process. Some students tried to scoot around the system and still did not show up to their designated time, but once they saw the benefits of the IFS (in terms of other students' work/results and attitudes towards English) I began to have a 100% attendance rate.

How it worked

Rather than submit work, students were booked into a weekly 15-40 minute time. During this session, all course work and essays were marked by us together. We read the entire piece and discussed ways to improve as we read each sentence and paragraph. I kept a copy of their work on file and the students also took away a photocopy with all the notes that they had written during the IFS.

Results

It took a while to get into the groove of the IFS but it made a great difference to the way I taught and the results students achieved. They gained a greater understanding of the course and their abilities. Moreover, once students knew that their work was going to be read out and discussed at length with their teacher they put in more effort. The system also bonded the group together as they worked towards the final exam.

Compared with the previous year, the results for my second year of teaching Year 12 (and my first using the IFS) were awesome!

Year	Number of students	Number of students who received a study score of 40 or above	Percentage of students who received a study score of 40 or above
2007	19	4	21%
2008	20	11	55%

While you could put the improved results down to my being a more confident teacher as a second year, the rate of students achieving a study score above 40 has remained consistent each year since.

For two years I had two year 12 English classes and the IFS went from once a week to once a fortnight. Although these two years were much more stressful for me as a teacher, because of having to work with and monitor double the number of students, the IFS continued to reap excellent results.

It is also important to note I teach at an open entry school, with varying levels of student engagement and abilities. I have found that the IFS works really well in Year 12 with students who have traditionally not thought of themselves as being strong at English. By having the chance to sit with their teacher and read their work aloud, ask questions and receive feedback, the students become more informed about how to improve their work and deal with essay questions and the pressures of the final exam. Overall, the IFS have helped all students make great inroads in their understanding and overall scores in English.

5th year and going strong - IFS as it come to be

In 2012, roughly five years since I introduced the IFS, it has become the cornerstone of my teaching of Year 12. The IFS has grown and changed.

Over the course of the year the nature of the IFS changes also. Initially, I read through the piece of work and the conversation is more about my thoughts and comments. Later in the year, students read through their work with me

and get used to their voice or tone when writing essays. Sometimes at the end of the IFS, I give the student their score and then they tell me how and why I came up with that score. Towards the end of the year, I give the essay to the student, send them away to read it and make comments and then we meet up later and discuss what scores and comments we each recorded. Students also now record the IFS on the iPhones and have the discussion available for reflection when they write their next piece.

What has not changed is my steadfast belief that when teachers take time to sit down with students to discuss their work, great improvements can be achieved in student engagement and results. Moreover, the IFS are a lot of fun and help foster greater student/teacher relationships.

A picture of practice.

In order to discuss and analyse the success of the IFS, I wanted to not only rely on statistics relating to end of year results, but also to paint a picture of how the system works. So I decided to look at the system through the lens of the Project Zero 8 cultural forces¹. Various student responses to a survey on the IFS have also been filtered throughout my response.

8 Cultural Forces

Expectations	Time	Modelling	Language & Conversations
Interactions & Relationships	Routines and Structures	Opportunities	Physical Environments

Expectations

Aside from the expectation that students arrive to class, partake in conversations and work with each other in groups, the IFS is an added requirement. At first, students can be unsure about the IFS expectations, but when they have been to a couple they realise that everything is on the table! We may talk about where they had coffee on the weekend, how a character relates to something they watched on television or how a song really relates to a theme in our text. Then we could jump to the student's use of conjunctions, how they construct introductions or what makes a great topic sentence.

I stress that their chance to "fall flat on their face" is during the IFS. I want them to feel that the IFS are a safe place to stretch their imaginations, go out on a limb and just see what could happen. I expect students to be bold and daring in their thinking. Like a ballet dancer goes back to the barre or a musician recites their scales, I want students to view the IFS as providing an opportunity to refine and build upon their skills and understanding.

One student commented that the IFS “allows me to push myself to work harder and try out different ideas” because “at the IFS session I can learn whether or not they work and how they need to change.”

Another expectation is that students will be completing a written piece of work each week for their IFS. This means that by the time that a student sits an in class essay under exam conditions they may have written 3-5 pieces.

Yet, the greatest shift in expectations that happens from the IFS is that the onus for completing the work shifts from teacher to student. It is their time. They bring what they want to the session. They can make the most of it or not. If a student does not have the work I generally make them write it in front of me for the 30 minutes.

The students come to realise very quickly that the work they bring to the session needs to be their best, as we are going to read through it word for word and together we are going to annotate and appraise it. As one student remarked, “Having an IFS makes me put extra effort into my work” because “I know it will be read through by the teacher with me.” They commented that, “I want to make sure that I am coherent, structured and insightful in my responses, so I know that they warrant being read out and analysed” Another student suggested that the IFS made them more “self-directed” and that “I have more freedom in choosing the direction of my work and managing the time to do that work.”

Opportunities

In senior English classes our feedback is predominantly given through written comments. While class discussions are a great way to offer feedback, often those students who are comfortable voicing their thoughts dominate, and all teachers can be sure of is that those students are on the mark and not the students who tend to be more reserved. The IFS is a perfect opportunity for students to ask questions, but they need to feel comfortable with the system and that they are an equal participant in the process. This is where Maya Angelou's aforementioned words are of vital relevance. One student remarked that the IFS “makes sure I learn what I need to improve to achieve my goals” and that it is “very valuable to have that time with my teacher one on one.”

Regarding the nature of English as a subject, a student suggested that in English “the answer is not always black and white, which leaves some students alienated from the subject.” They suggested that “for this reason, the IFS is helpful as teachers can direct students and help them to improve.”

Routines & structures

Studying in Year 12 can be stressful. Aside from having to complete School Assessed Coursework, there are many pressures and expectations in each subject. Try as we may to make sure that the study load is not too much,

subject teachers do not necessarily consider how much homework that they are giving in relation to the student's other subjects. A student can have no homework one night and then be bamboozled by a huge amount of tasks to complete the next night.

Having an IFS takes away some of this pressure, as students know that each week on a particular day and time they are required to have a task completed. In the survey responses, one student supported this notion when he remarked that the IFS "make everything more organised for me" because "I have a set date and can plan my other classes and study around English." He commented that "I know when my work is due therefore there are no surprises and no excuses". Another student suggested that the IFS worked well because "I see the work and feedback instead of shoving it into the back of my locker and forgetting about it." Another commented that "The system is a definite way of providing a path through which I can improve". Still another said "As the school year gets increasingly busy, it has become more useful as often I do not have a lot of time to revise for SACs. So, the IFS helps me improve."

Language & conversations

As English teachers we write copious amounts of comments on student essays and work, but do students have the chance to ask questions of our comments? Can we recall why we wrote them in the first place when it's been a couple of days or week since we wrote them?

Moreover, often students receive our comments and, while we think we are being clear and concise, they are often left bewildered and confused. The IFS allows student the chance to ask "Could you explain what you mean by that?"

A student wrote "By sitting with you, we as students know exactly what we did well and what we need to improve on instead of just getting our work back and looking at the mark we got." Their comment really highlights how the language and conversations that happen at an IFS can help students in their understanding of tasks and assessment pieces. Aside from the academic focus, the IFS offer a chance for teachers to meet with students and ask "How are you?", "What's this week been like for you?" or say "You won't believe what my week has been like!"

When you break it all down, we are in the business of building relationships and sharing ideas. The IFS offer an opportunity to meet with Year 12 students on an even level and have a conversation about life and what it means to be human (all wrapped up in a discussion of Hamlet, Blanche Dubois or any novel/play or character that you may be studying).

Modelling

Having the IFS completed in pairs is a great chance to showcase how different students think and create their work. Students are also presented with different perspectives on essays and work requirements. You are able to say "That's really a really good idea but do you see how *student A* has developed it further?"

Using other students' work in explanations during the IFS allows students to see how ideas can be fully explored and expanded upon. As one student remarked, "By seeing your classmate's work you can make changes to your own and see what you can improve on or what you did that they haven't done which I think is a useful resource."

Often I will also say to students, "Your task for the next IFS is..." and "I will also do that also. Next week, when we meet we will look over both of our attempts to do..." Not only does this suggest to students that I am invested in their development as writers and thinkers, but it also helps to model the types of daring and thinking that I expect.

The IFS is also a wonderful time to model the types of structures and thinking that examiners are looking for in the final exam. As one student suggested, "It shows students how teachers and examiners mark particular pieces of assessment" Another student wrote, "I am not as afraid of SACs as I feel more prepared and ready. I also know what is expected and what examiners and markers are looking for."

Interactions & relationships

One of the benefits of the IFS is that students realise that teachers are there to help them. By making my time available to students they see that I am willing to put time into their learning, but only if they are also. Most humans want to feel secure, supported, validated and to be given opportunities to reach their full potential. I have found that the IFS supports such aims and, throughout the course of an academic year, students feel that they can test the limits of their thinking and take risks in their learning and work, all while feeling supported and encouraged.

Physical environments

Generally, IFS take place on the Senior School terrace. This is a public space available to all in Senior School. It is a great place to meet as it sets an expectation that learning can happen outside the confines of the classroom. The atmosphere is relaxed and lends itself to a more casual, yet focussed, discussion of the course and students' writing. It is also a good chance for other students to sit in on the session, ask questions or seek clarification as we talk through a piece of work. Having the IFS take place in this space opens up the dialogue as it makes the students feel more comfortable about the process. It sends a direct message that I am willing to meet with the students

on their “level” and that this process is not about me but rather about how we both can learn and reflect with each other.

Time

- How much times does it take you to mark an essay?
- How long does it take for students to read those comments?
- Do they read them?
- Can they put into action your comments?

While many staff members have commented that the IFS is “time consuming” and that I have no time during the day, ultimately it saves time. I take no Year 12 work home! Also, by taking my time to meet with the students, they understand that I believe in the task that has been set and that it deserves time and attention. Taking time with the students also suggests to them that I am willing to invest time into to their studies and that they should be prepared to do the same. A student highlighted that the IFS “is beneficial, as instead of getting just a grade, the teacher can take the time to work with me individually to identify areas of improvement and also areas that I have covered well.”

Where to from here?

With the success of the IFS in my year 12 classes, I decided this year to extend the system to include my Year 11 International Baccalaureate English A class.

You could be right in thinking “How? When do you have spare time?” And while I have toyed with that very same problem, I have recently found a solution.

This term I introduced an IFS system where I see my IB students in pairs once a fortnight at 7:30am in the morning for a hour before school starts.

The IFS system will be in place for the two years of the IB course.

I put together a booklet of passages that the students will analyse each fortnight over the next 16 months. With each fortnight's passage there is a criteria sheet and an examiners' report clarifying what students should have written about. Once we have read through the written commentary, we then use the examiner's report to help us decide upon the grading of each criteria.

From the first couple of IFS, the students have taken more ownership of their learning and the morning sessions have really strengthened our working relationship.

During a recent session, a student asked “Can I record the IFS on my iPhone?” I asked why and she remarked, “I want to be able to listen to what

we discuss again." To me, that points to the success of the IFS. It is all about students taking ownership of their learning, teachers being reflections of the attitudes and abilities that they want to see in their students, the building of relationships and the sharing of ideas.

ⁱ Ritchhart, Ron. (2002). *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (p 146). California, United States: John Wiley & Sons, Inc