Giving constructive feedback

Giving feedback is an important part of your role as not only does it help student teachers to improve their present classroom practice, but also it sows the seed for the quest for continuous personal development.

Activity 16: Giving feedback to my student teacher

This activity helps you to improve the feedback you give to your student teachers.

Before you read this section, think about the last time you gave feedback to a student teacher. (If you can, record the feedback session and listen to it when you get home.)

- How much of the time did you spend talking?
- How much time did the student teacher have to talk?
- How many questions did you ask the student teacher?
- How many questions did the student teacher ask?
- How many suggestions on possible improvements did you make?
- How many suggestions on possible improvements did the student teacher make?
- How many suggestions on possible alternative strategies did you make?
- How many suggestions on possible alternative strategies did the student teacher make?

Return to these questions on your own experiences once you have read this section on good practice. Are there any changes you might make?

Before the observation, it is best to ask the student teacher about the learning and teaching strategies he/she is working on and agree with him/her beforehand the areas you are going to give and he/she would welcome feedback on. The TESSA materials have very clear learning outcomes for teachers within each section, so most feedback should be based around these if these have been used. However, you might want to agree that you also need to look at some other areas too, for example the student teacher’s voice levels or his/her ability to include all pupils in the lesson. Also keep a clear focus or you will both be trying to cover too much ground in one go thereby losing clear focus for improvement.
Here are some suggestions for a helpful feedback session.

You want the student teacher to listen to all of your advice; you are an experienced educator so it is important that you find a quiet private place for feedback so the student teacher is relaxed and receptive.

Give student teachers the chance to reflect on their own performance first. Let them write down or state what they saw as the positive points of the lesson (expect at least three positive points), what they felt needed improving and what they would do differently next time – one or two areas to improve on might be sufficient. This will usually provide a good basis for discussion. Student teachers not used to doing this might need help in being specific and self-critical. Allow time for this.

Here are some questions which you can use to help your student teacher to reflect. You might want to use some of these questions and there is no need to use all of them.

The questions that you use will vary with the student teacher and the lesson you observed.

1) How successful was this lesson? What made it successful? Or not successful?
2) What were the main strengths and weaknesses of the lesson?
3) Did the pupils learn what they were intended to learn?
4) Did the lesson address the pupils’ needs?
5) Was the lesson at an appropriate level of difficulty?
6) Were all pupils involved in the lesson?
7) Did the lesson arouse their interest in the subject matter?
8) Did you prepare sufficiently for the lesson?
9) Do you need to reteach any aspect of the lesson?
10) What would be a suitable follow-up to the lesson?
11) Could you have used alternative teaching strategies?
12) Which strategies from this lesson will you use again? Why?

When the student teacher has given his/her reflection on the lesson, you should say what you saw as the positive points in the performance and hopefully agree with those selected
by the student. Be encouraging. Give ample praise for things well done. Particularly
comment on improvements that have resulted from previous discussions: ‘It was great to see
you put into practice the group work idea we discussed last time…’.

- Be specific in all your feedback – avoid general comments. Don’t just say: ‘Your
classroom management was good,’ – say why you thought it was good. What did you see
that was good? Always provide concrete examples, for example ‘It was
particularly effective when you used this material, it really gained the pupils’ interest
as they were able to see the process you had explained in action’.

- Avoid words like ‘but’ and ‘however’. For example: ‘Most of your questions were very
clear but sometimes they were too complicated.’ When listeners hear ‘but’ they will
only concentrate on the phrase following the ‘but’. Keep the two separate.

- After giving the positive feedback (and checking that the student teacher agrees with
you), go through the main things that could be improved, for example ‘I felt that there
were one or two questions that were too complicated. Questions such
as can you give me an example?’

- Write down and agree together on two or three issues that the student teacher will
work on for the next lesson. It is tempting to have a long list of ideas, but two or three
is the maximum that can be effectively dealt with at a time. So identify between you
what are the most important areas. If you are not going to see the student teacher
after the next session, agree a way in which they can give feedback to you – by
phone or letter, or by using a peer to observe and give feedback. Ask the student
teacher what they have learnt today and how they will incorporate it into their practice
over the next few days. Ask them to jot down what happens.

- You have a key role to play in helping your student teachers to think critically about
their teaching. Remember that thinking critically includes identifying the things that
work well in addition to those that were not so successful. Ask the student teachers
what they would repeat and what they would do differently in the future.

Remember also that you will need to help your students to focus these discussions on
teaching in ways that help pupils to learn. You should support your student teachers by
encouraging them to discuss other ways in which the strategies could be used in their
teaching, both in other topics and in other subjects.

You should conclude by revisiting the positive points of the session, for example ‘Your
questions at the start of the lesson were very effective; you involved all the pupils and
your questions were open-ended.’

Share if you learnt anything new by observing the student teacher’s work, for example ‘I
liked the way you asked the pupils to think up questions for a revision session and test
each other.’
Activity 17: Preparing for the feedback to my student teacher

This activity will help you to prepare yourself before you do your next feedback.

- Plan the questions you are going to ask your student teacher.
- Write yourself a prompt sheet. If it helps, write it on your phone – you will be able to amend it after you have carried out the debrief and have it handy for future debriefs.