

Student feedback : introducing the feed-forward sandwich

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Student Feedback; Introducing the Feed-Forward Sandwich

by Sarah Naylor MSc, DCR, PgC & Chris Wright MSc, HDCR, CertEd

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INTRODUCTION

It is often difficult to know what to say when asked to comment on a student's clinical performance; traditionally known as giving feedback. The situation is exacerbated when students are not performing well, creating a stressful environment. This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of a new style of student-mentor interaction, the 'feed-forward sandwich', as a more constructive approach to giving feedback, helping to focus on what could be done better next time rather than on what went wrong now.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative methodology in the form of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with a detailed examination of an individual lived experience and how they make sense of that experience (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The primary concern of IPA is with the detailed account of individual experience, with an emphasis on quality not quantity, and studies benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases (Smith et al, 2009). With this in mind, a longitudinal study was adopted with a group of eight participants over a twelve month period from qualification through the first twelve months in clinical practice. Ethical consent was obtained from the higher education institute. Each participant was provided with an information sheet and written consent obtained prior to data collection. All names were changed in order to preserve anonymity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted before starting work and at three, six and twelve months post employment. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed using the structured IPA process adopted by Smith et al (2009). This involved first analysing the data phenomenologically to consider 'What did they actually say?' and secondly interpretatively to consider 'What does this mean?'

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Thematic coding of the transcripts highlights several key issues. Finding the right words to give negative feedback is consistently problematic although to some extent this is a manifestation of experience and training. Although some departments try to limit the amount of responsibility that newly qualified staff have for student's, in practice those interviewed were involved with students almost immediately. Even after being in post for twelve months they found providing written comments on a student's performance difficult, using the traditional approach, where it is consistently easier to give feedback to high performing students than to those who are struggling. One could assume from this that their comments would also lack areas for development which are necessary for a student's development.

"I've done quite a few assessments and I've found the ones that you do with the students who know what they're doing and they're quite confident enough for 3rd years and things, they're quite easy to do because you're just writing nice things anyway, so you can't, it's when you've got the 1st years and they need to improve on things, it's wording it in the right way that it's not sounds like a negative as such, so that you're not knocking their confidence back and things." (Helen)

This comment highlights the need to provide feedback against a set of stated criteria. With increasing experience, a reasonable expectation of performance is that students improve, however without these key measurement criteria mentors may feel pressured to comment on events outside scope. Personal dy-

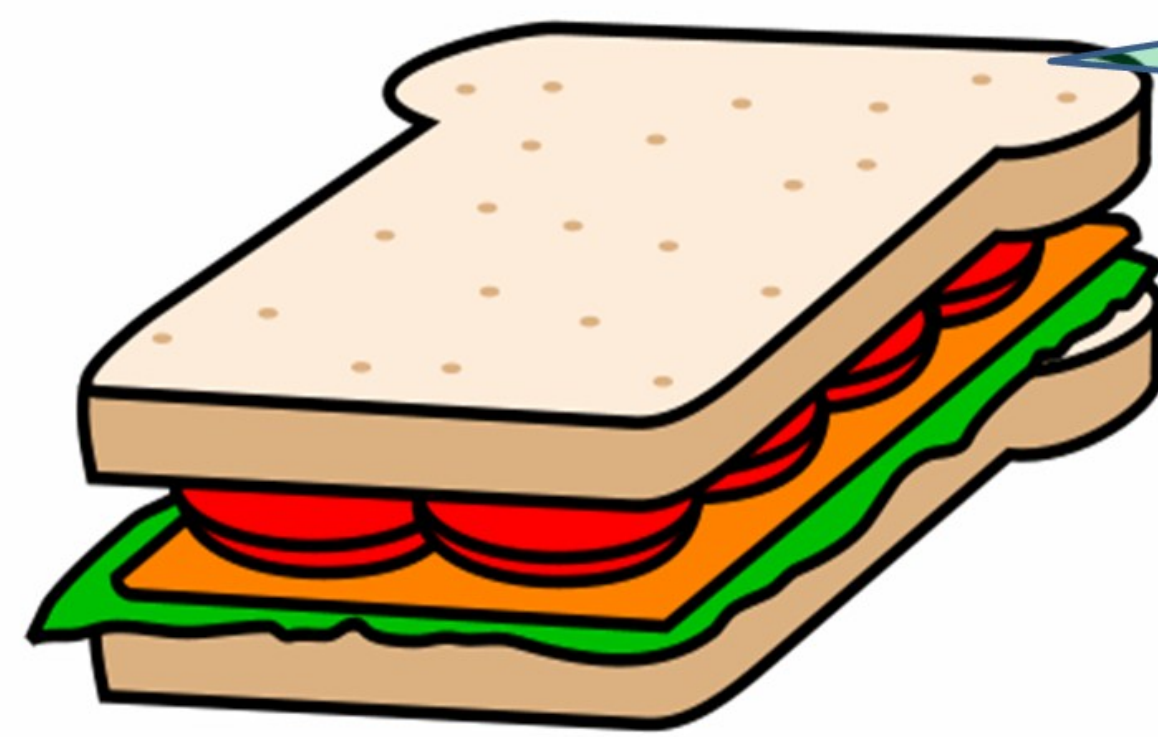
namics may increasingly come into play as students and mentors spend more time together.

The situation is exacerbated when students are not performing well, creating a stressful environment. Although Frank was finding it difficult to separate his personal and professional relationships with the students he highlighted the problem of finding the right way to structure his feedback.

"I think I may be a little bit lenient. Probably in that I don't know, it's because I have a good relationship with the students that I think I may be a little bit lenient.... I try and put one or two things but it is easy to fall into the trap of just being very positive and not wanting to be so negative.....Because sometimes you do think of something that you could write that they have obviously done blatantly wrong but at the time I don't sometimes put it because you struggle to find a nicer way in the time pressure rather than going away and thinking about it and find the right way of putting that. But at the moment it just sounds far too harsh to turn round and go..no basically they did this wrong." (Frank)

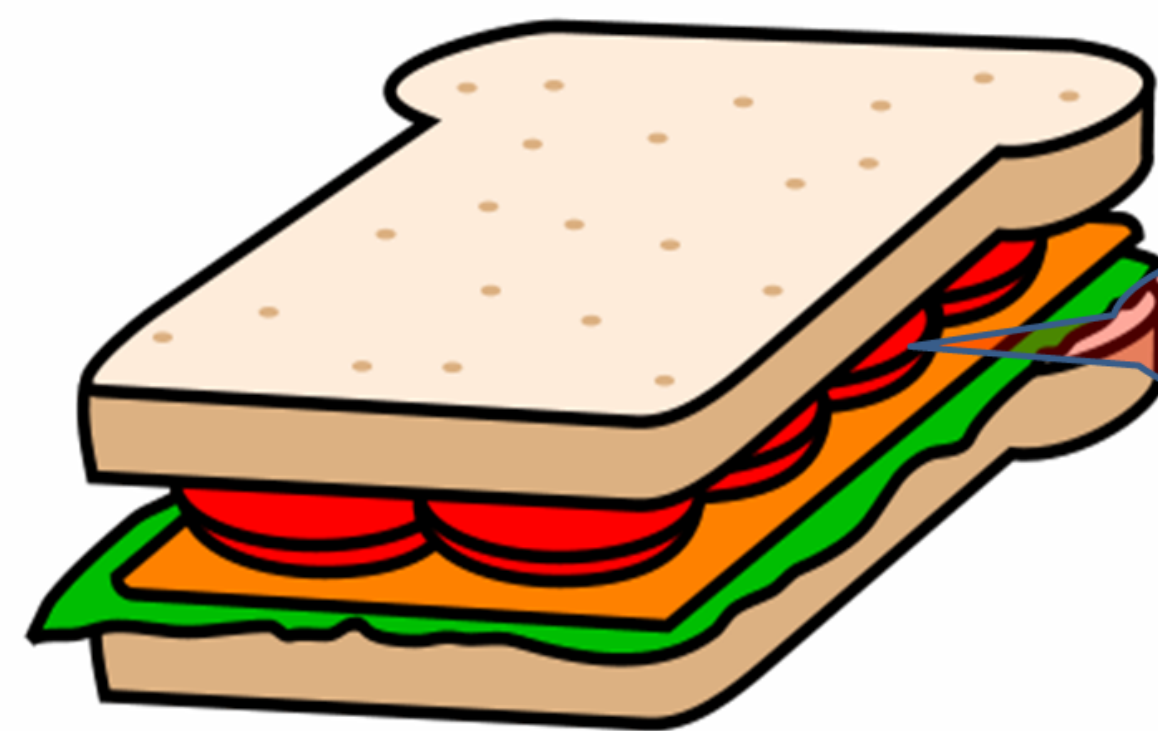
These comments resonate with feedback received from more experienced supervising radiographers during meetings between academic and clinical staff and clearly identify a training need. As a result of the, feed-forward sandwich approach was introduced within the clinical departments who work in partnership with SHU. The graphic depicts a typical example of the feed-forward sandwich. This approach overcomes the consistent anxiety, particularly in the early months after becoming a clinical mentor, by providing a safe opening statement

that students will find positive. Delivering the filling in the sandwich then becomes much easier. Knowing that the discussion is going to end on a positive note also has an effect on reducing the anxiety levels reported by mentors. Respondents consistently felt that their increased confidence in giving feedback reflected well on the students and overall a positive impact on their professional relationship.



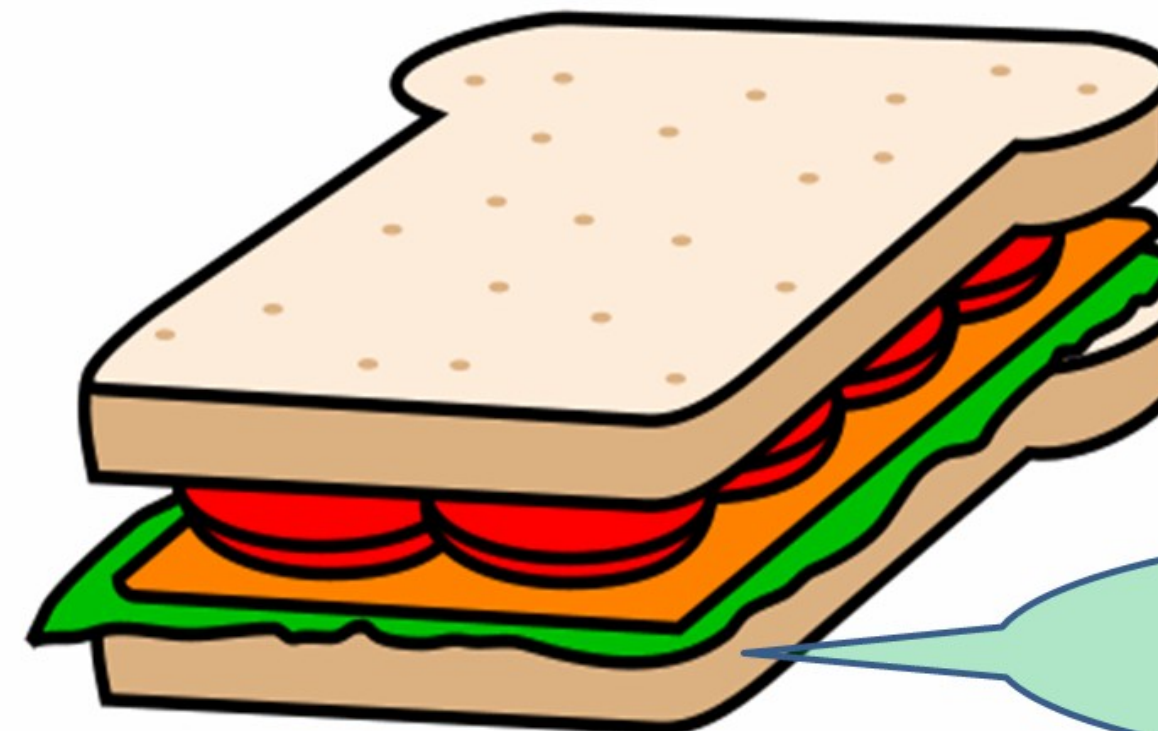
"You introduced yourself and explained the procedure clearly to the patient. Keep maintaining that good eye contact".

STEP 1 What Went Well



"You appeared a bit unsure of the position and repositioned quite a lot. Try to be more confident and decisive next time".

STEP 2 What Did Not Go Well



"It is good that you know about half your anatomy. You need to focus on learning this a bit more thoroughly".

STEP 3 What Went Well

CONCLUSION

When giving student feedback it is helpful to focus on what they could do better next time rather than on what went wrong. It is good practice to give comments on both what went well and what did not. Open the dialogue with a positive overview of events that went well. Next raise any issues or areas that did not go so well. Finally close with more positive reflection on how to build on what went well in the future. The feed-forward sandwich approach has proven to be a reliable approach to help structure feedback, reducing mentor anxiety, particularly in the early years post registration, whilst imparting a positive experience on the students being appraised. We recommend this approach as the standard induction protocol for newly appointed Radiographers.

REFERENCES

- Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008
- Smith et al (2009)