

# Do They Hear You?

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To make sure students will accept and use feedback, integrate these three strategic moves into your instruction.

Feedback is powerful. In fact, research suggests that feedback can be one of the most effective instructional strategies for improving student performance and closing achievement gaps (Hattie, 2012). Unfortunately, although getting teachers to provide feedback is relatively easy, getting students to receive that feedback is complicated.

In our experience, students who actually receive feedback are usually willing to use it. Why doesn't this happen more often? One problem is bias—like all of us, students seek feedback that boosts their self-image. If feedback is vague and personal, they may selectively accept only positive comments ("Great job! You're so smart!") and defensively reject negative comments ("This paragraph is confusing, with some awkward sentences"). What's worse, neither of these kinds of "feedback" is actionable; they do nothing to inform the student about what he or she should do in the future.

It's not easy to break through the walls that everyone has about receiving feedback, but it's well worth the effort. Here are some approaches that can help ensure that your feedback will be received.

## Establish Clear Success Criteria

We cannot overstate the importance of setting clear expectations for learning. To make the most of feedback, teachers and students must understand what success looks like. When students are able to compare their performance with a clearly understood criterion for success, they are more likely to accept and value the feedback the teacher provides to help them reach that goal.

For example, teacher Melanie Strauss wanted her world history students to understand the specific events that influenced the rise of the empires of Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, and Russia in the 18th century and to use this information to gain insight into world events today. From their work in the instructional unit so far, her students understood the concept of an empire. They had studied the empire building of these three countries, and they had compared international timelines to explore the idea that history happens simultaneously all over the world. Ms. Strauss began a new lesson by saying,

Remember the CNN Student News page from last week about Russia? The annexation of Crimea from Ukraine by the Russian Federation has its roots in the Russian Empire dating back to the 1780s. It's still relevant. When you know the history behind the development of a country, you can get a sense of what their citizens value and why. Your challenge is to identify and explain *why* strong central governments dominated Europe by 1750. When you can answer this question, you'll be ready to figure out why relations between Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, and Russia changed as they fought for dominance.

In this introduction, the teacher communicated her learning intention, attempted to make the learning relevant for students, and provided a definition of success for the day. In the lesson that followed, her students worked in small "expert" groups to identify the changes for their assigned empire. Ms. Strauss had populated the online learning management system with several articles and websites about each country, as well as commentaries from historians about this time period. The students were tasked with reading and

taking notes on several documents to examine how the countries changed geographically, politically, economically, and socially. Then they reconvened in home groups to compare similarities and differences among the three empires. Each home group proposed a hypothesis for why central governments rose to prominence at this time, citing evidence the students had first formulated in the expert groups.

During the discussions, Ms. Strauss offered feedback to the groups, helping students identify what additional information they would need to refine their ideas and writing. As she met with one group, she noticed that they had included little evidence in their draft. Rather than simply telling them to add more evidence, she said, "I'm thinking that your readers might disagree with one of your statements. How could you make it more convincing?"

Arturo immediately answered, "We should say where we got the information so they could check if they wanted." The students welcomed her feedback because it was delivered just when they needed it to reach their clearly understood success criterion.

Here's another example. Students in a 3rd grade class were writing opinion papers. They had studied a number of ways in which writers can use lead sentences to engage their readers. In the current lesson, their teacher wanted them to learn about writing for an audience. She said,

Today, you'll have a chance to write your lead three different ways so that you can determine the best way to start. You'll get a chance to talk with three different classmates about your leads so that they can tell you which ones they think work the best and why. Then the choice is yours. You'll know you are successful when you have selected a lead for your paper that captures your audience's attention, and when you can explain why you chose it.

Again, the teacher's clarity invited students into the lesson and opened the door for accepting and valuing feedback from others as students took ownership of their learning.

## Provide Different Kinds of Feedback

Feedback should help students answer three questions (Hattie, 2012): *Where* am I going (what are the success criteria)? *How* am I going (what progress am I making toward those goals)? and *Where* do I need to go *next*? By keeping these questions in mind and providing different kinds of feedback depending on what the learner needs at the time, teachers can ensure that their feedback is robust and meaningful.

We've already discussed the importance of addressing the first question—Where am I going?—by providing clear success criteria. Feedback to address the second question (How am I going?) may be related to three factors (Hattie & Timperley, 2007):

- *The learner's success in doing the task.* This kind of feedback is the most frequently given, as it speaks directly to the success criteria. It helps students note where and when errors were made, but more important, it helps them understand and correct those errors. To prepare for giving feedback about the task, ask yourself such questions as, Does the student's answer meet the success criteria? What did he or she do well? Where did he or she go wrong? What other information is needed to meet the criteria?
- *The processes the learner is using.* The purpose of feedback at this level is to guide students to self-correct their own cognitive operations. We want our students to ask themselves, How did I get here, and where am I going next? In preparing to give students feedback about the processes they have used, ask yourself, What is wrong and why? What strategies did he or she use? What is his or her understanding of the concepts/knowledge related to the task?
- *The self-regulatory habits the learner is developing.* As students deepen their knowledge of a topic, they are increasingly open to feedback that challenges them to reflect on the metacognitive

processes they used to learn the content. Ask students questions such as, What happened when you ...? What further doubts do you have regarding this task? How have your ideas changed?

For example, Ryan Knight, an 11th grade English teacher, shifted the kinds of feedback he gave his students over a three-week unit during which they read, discussed, and analyzed a number of 20th century short stories. "I often provide them with feedback about the task throughout the unit, but even more so in the beginning," he said.

Some of this early feedback was focused on the students' success in performing the task. For instance, when students practiced writing thesis statements, Mr. Knight wanted them to understand that these statements should set up an argument, not just present facts. Before students began writing a short essay on Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," he asked them to draft a thesis statement and turn it in as an exit slip. The next day, he read some of the students' responses to this prompt without identifying the writers, posing questions like, "What is this student doing well?" and "Where does this student need improvement?" After the class discussion, students edited their own thesis statements to better meet the success criterion. One student's original thesis state was *In the short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor contrasts what a "good man" is through the relationship between the grandmother and the Misfit.* After participating in the feedback session, the student recognized that this sentence was factual but did not set up an argument. He revised it, writing, *In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor uses the relationship between the grandmother and the Misfit to comment on the high price that society pays when a life is lived selfishly.*

As students' content knowledge deepened, Mr. Knight's feedback shifted as well. In addition to focusing students' attention on the task itself, he posed questions about processes used by the student writers. He asked such questions as, "The response is correct, but why is it correct?" He would also read passages from several student essays and ask, "What do these have in common?" to help students develop the cognitive habit of looking for patterns. For example, one pattern that students noted focused on explanations for quotes. As Mykela commented, "In the examples we like better they always have a sentence to explain what the quote means. It makes a connection from the quote to the topic. The ones we don't like so much just have random quotes stuck in the paper."

Toward the end of the unit, Mr. Knight intentionally shifted his feedback to focus on the self-regulatory habits he was trying to develop in his students. These metacognitive behaviors are important because students who become skilled at thinking about their thinking are more likely to take their learning with them from year to year. Unlike cognitive tasks, such as remembering information or comparing and contrasting ideas, metacognitive tasks involve strategically planning how to complete a task, matching specific skills and strategies to the task, monitoring one's own understanding, self-assessing performance, evaluating progress toward the completion of a task, and self-correcting as the task is completed.

For example, Mr. Knight asked his students to journal about their approach to writing thesis statements. He asked them to "consider what you do when you receive a writing prompt. How do you approach the task, and is that working for you?" As he read their reflections, he noted that several students included ideas that they could use in the future, but a few students just summarized what they did for the current topic. Mr. Knight knew that he needed to meet with the latter group to help them think more strategically.

At another point, he asked the class to assess their performance, saying "I am sorry to interrupt your great work, but I would really appreciate it if you could stop and reflect on your success. What's working for you, right now, and what's not?" He invited students to share and provided them with commentary about their success.

Andrew said, "I think what's working for me is having my notes and annotations here while I write. I don't have to reread to find everything because I can just read my own notes to remember what I was thinking when I read it before. That makes me realize that I should step up my annotations because it makes things

easier for me later." Mr. Knight commented, "That could be a useful process for you. I hope you'll try it out and monitor yourself to see if it's working."

## Promote Students' Listening Skills

If students aren't skilled in listening, they won't benefit from feedback. The well-known listening skills that students are often taught—such as tracking the speaker, monitoring body language, and not interrupting—are important, but not sufficient. These outward signs can mask a lack of attention to the feedback being given. There's a significant difference between hearing and listening. True listening requires attending to the message, not just looking like one is interested and understands.

Two conditions can help cultivate students' capacity to listen to feedback across their entire school career. The first condition is that structured feedback should occur regularly. To make students conscious of the role feedback plays in their learning, we should schedule formal feedback sessions, including frequent short conferences between teachers and individual students.

The second condition is to teach students how to paraphrase the feedback they receive, thereby demonstrating that they understand it. This can occur regularly as a part of the informal feedback conversations teachers have with students. After giving a student feedback about a piece of work, try asking the student to repeat your comments back to you in his or her own words so that you can confirm that he or she understands and knows what to do next.

Of course, students will be more confident in paraphrasing if they see it explicitly modeled by their teachers. Kindergarten teacher Francesco Calderón regularly features a conversation station as part of his centers rotation (Bond & Wasik, 2009). The teacher has a list of questions he asks the children who visit the center. For instance, he asks them, "Tell me about what you do when you go to the grocery store," and listens carefully to their replies. Mr. Calderón then paraphrases what each student has said. "Tell me if I am correct, Emory. What I heard you say is that when you go to the grocery store ...." Sometimes he makes deliberate errors so he and the students can talk about what he can do to improve his listening. "They learn by explaining what they hear," he said. "As the year evolves, we begin to talk about their work, and they bring examples to the conversation station. What begins as simple conversations and paraphrasing becomes guided practice with providing critiques and feedback to one another."

## Powering Up Feedback

There's no doubt that providing feedback to students can be useful. But we're concerned that many students do not receive the feedback that has been provided. Our experience and review of research suggest that these specific strategies—clarifying the learning intentions and success criteria, matching the level of feedback with the task, and teaching listening skills—can increase the likelihood that students will use feedback. Together, these actions can put more power behind feedback and thus improve students' learning.

## References

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