

Tips for Giving Effective Feedback to Learners

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Abstract: Feedback occurs when outputs of a system are routed back as inputs as part of a chain of cause-and-effect that forms a circuit or loop. The system can then be said to feed back into itself. The notion of cause-and-effect has to be handled carefully when applied to feedback systems.

Key words: feedback, incremental process, learner achievement, misconceptions, ongoing feedback, effective teaching, learning strategies.

Feedback is a compelling influence on learner achievement. When teachers seek or at least are open to what learners know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions when they are not engaged- then teaching and learning can be synchronised and powerful. Feedback to teachers makes learning visible.

Feedback is a key element of the incremental process of ongoing learning and assessment. Providing frequent and ongoing feedback is a significant means of improving achievement in learning. It involves the provision of information about aspects of understanding and performance and can be given by practitioners, peers, oneself and from learners to practitioners. Effective feedback assists the learner to reflect on their learning and their learning strategies so they can make adjustments to make better progress in their learning. Reporting to parents and families commonly occurs at least twice per year in a formal written statement from the school. Involving parents and families in the learning process by providing them with more frequent feedback about their child's learning progress and strategies they may use to assist their child to improve is effective in improving student achievement.

Effective feedback is designed to determine a learner's level of understanding and skill development to plan the next steps towards achieving the learning intentions or goals.

Feedback provides the practitioner and learner with evidence about current knowledge and skill development. Understanding the learner's progress and level of achievement enables the practitioner to make decisions about the next steps to plan in the learning program. It enables the learner to reflect on their learning strategies to confirm them or make changes to improve their learning.

Feedback is one of the most effective teaching and learning strategies and has an immediate impact on learning progress. High-quality feedback is specific and ongoing.

Effective feedback from the practitioner:

- focuses on the quality of the learner's work product and/or processes
- motivates and challenges the learner to further develop their knowledge and skills
- does not give praise, reward or punishment
- recognises that which the student has done well and identifies what has been misunderstood or not understood
- focuses on the quality of the work and is specific
- is directly linked to the learning intentions and success criteria
- may be spoken, a gesture or formalised in writing.

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Feedback from learner to practitioner:

Listening to answers to questions and looking closely at the work of learners on learning tasks provides practitioners with powerful feedback about the level of learner understanding and their practice. This evidence supports reflection and can provide strategies to more effectively assist learners to make progress with their learning.

Feedback from and to peers:

Feedback often comes informally from and to peers. It can be improved and used productively if learners are taught concrete strategies for evaluating one another's work against the learning intentions and the success criteria and providing appropriate feedback. Knowing the questions to ask when evaluating learning assists learners in the process of self-assessment.

Feedback is designed to bring about an improvement in learners' performance and achievement. Feedback can be given by the practitioner or by peers. It can be either formal or informal. It can be oral or written, it can be formative or summative, but overall it must provide the learner with specific advice on how to improve their performance.

The process of giving feedback begins with the practitioner and learner clarifying the learning intentions (or goals) for the activities they are undertaking and the success criteria by which they will assess the level of achievement to be demonstrated by learners. This enables the learners to measure their performance in terms of both mastery of the set task and the processes inherent in it. It also helps them to be clear about future goals.

Learning intentions explicitly state what the learner should know, understand and be able to do by the end of an activity, unit of work, or a lesson and they are expressed in language learners understanding. The learning intention should answer the learner who asks "Why are we learning this?"

Sharing and providing clarity on what the learner will learn is the purpose of the learning intention. Clearly stated skills, knowledge or understandings are the focus of the learning Intentions and are written in a language the students can understand.

A learning intention is not what task the learner should be able to do; it is not 'Write an essay' but rather 'Explain why people migrated to Australia. A learning intention is what students should learn as a result of the teaching and learning activities. The medium by which learners demonstrate their learning is the essay but it is not the goal.

Another example is from Music where learners may create a sound picture. The Learning Intention is to 'understand variation in rhythmic patterns. The medium by which learners demonstrate their learning is a sound picture.

Learners may also set their learning intentions. The success criteria set the performance by which achievement of the learning intentions will be measured. The success criteria are made known to the learners and for learning to be most effective the success criteria are co-constructed with the learners.

Effective feedback informs the learner about their progress towards meeting the success criteria. A useful model for feedback is presented by Hattie as 'Feed Up, Feed Back, Feed Forward. In this model the learner considers three questions:

Feed Up

1. Where am I going (what are my learning intentions?)

Feed Back

2. How am I going (what does the evidence tell me?)

Feed Forward

3. Where to next (what learning activities should I do to make better progress?)



Feedback needs to be timely. It needs to be given while there is still time for the learners to act on it and to monitor and adjust their learning.

It can be 'in-the-moment' in the case of classroom dialogue and discussion. The practitioner will receive feedback from the way learners answer questions and the questions asked by them. To effectively gather evidence from questioning about who does and who does not understand it may be necessary to vary the way, questions are asked in the classroom to ensure all learners can participate and provide evidence of their level of understanding. This evidence should indicate whether it is necessary to reteach, provide more varied discussion and practice, use peer teaching or move the learners forward.

Feedback on learning tasks also needs to be regular and provided as soon as possible after completion. Written, descriptive comments need to be in the language that is accessible to the learners and should refer back to the preliminary discussion of learning goals and success criteria. Effective feedback provides specific guidance on how to improve learning outcomes and it enables the learner to think about the learning involved in the task and not just the activity of completing the task.

The amount of feedback needs to be limited to what learners can reasonably accept. Effective feedback does not merely correct learners' errors but actively requires them to reconsider their work and think about why, for example, spelling and punctuation may be incorrect, where a mistake has been made in mathematical workings or an idea or situation has been misunderstood.

It is recognised that making errors is a fundamental point in improving learning. Feedback on where the misunderstandings and misconceptions are occurring assists learners to move to greater understanding and success, to become more self-directed and to believe in their ability to complete tasks and reach goals.

Feedback on formal tasks that just include marks or grades or comments that discuss the level of performance and suggest that the learning journey is finished should be avoided. This can prevent the learner from fully considering and acting on the feedback. Multiple forms of feedback, such as comments, questions, and discussion provided frequently during learning encourage engagement and motivation to succeed.

Effective feedback is understood by the recipient and motivates them to want to learn more effectively. When practitioners develop sound professional relationships with learners based on mutual respect, feedback is a two-way process that supports progress in learning for the learners and understanding about where the learners are on the learning continuum for the practitioners.

Tips for giving effective feedback to learners:

- Explain to the learners that you are focusing on helping them to understand the assessment of their learning
- Encourage learners to ask questions about their feedback
- Make a regular time to discuss feedback with learners on an individual or small group basis
- Advise learners that they will have an opportunity to ask questions about their assessment
- Encourage them to note down their questions
- Try to give feedback as close to the learning and assessment task as possible
- Be specific and explicit about feedback, providing examples where possible
- Establish that the student understands what is being discussed
- Ask the student what they think they need to improve on
- Offer your advice about future steps for improvement
- Invite conversations by asking learners to discuss the work with you and/or with their peers



Digital portfolios or ePortfolios are useful tools for enabling learners to maintain a permanent record of their learning journey and they provide practitioners with a readily accessible record of the learner's self-assessment and reflections on their learning strategies.

A digital portfolio is a carefully crafted presentation of a student's learning journey using digital artefacts as evidence of learning. It has a clear purpose and is well organised. It both develops and demonstrates learning through effective student reflection. The learner uses the higher-order metacognitive skills to consider what they learned and self-assess what they need to focus on next to progress their learning. Digital artefacts can be derived from learning activities across all learning domains. An effective digital portfolio can be used to celebrate achievement, demonstrate progress through comparison over time and guide future learning.

The production of a digital portfolio encourages a partnership between students and their teachers and increased student ownership and accountability for their learning. A digital portfolio provides students, their parents and teachers with a rich record of learning. A digital portfolio is not a collection of all student tasks, but careful selections that demonstrate growth and new knowledge such as two artefacts that show progression in learning over time.

A digital portfolio can be used in many ways. In a more sophisticated form the digital portfolio can be developed over several years and used as an ongoing record of progress, perhaps presented at "Student-Led conferences" and used to inform future learning plans. Best practice portfolios would integrate student goal setting, self-assessment and reflection on learning with the presentation of learning examples. Portfolios could also refer to expected student learning outcomes

The practitioner uses the evidence provided by the portfolio to reflect on the effectiveness of their instruction and to make adjustments to their teaching practice.

A digital portfolio consists of:

The digital artefacts within the portfolio. Digital artefacts may be audio, video, images, text and presentations constructed using any of the thousands of creative tools. Software such as Word/Pages, PowerPoint/Keynote, Excel/Numbers, movie maker/iMovie and free edustar products can be used. Online WEB2.0 services like SlideShare, Prezi, voki and mind42 and more recently iPad/android Apps are being used in schools to create digital artefacts.

The presentation platform used to organise and display the portfolio

The portfolio and its artefacts might be stored in the 'Cloud' in a student account. Portfolios can be organised and presented using software, web services or apps. Common software products such as Word/Pages, PowerPoint/Keynote and MS: OneNote can be used to construct digital portfolios. Current Web-based options include the Department's own Global2 and services such as Wikispaces, Evernote, Dropbox, Google-Apps for education, Prezi for Education, Weebly. There is also an increasing range of android/IOS apps such as Flowboard, Evernote, Voicethread, Open School portfolio, Three Ring, Kidblog, Weebly. Also, some learning management systems have the functionality to facilitate a digital portfolio.

Simple causal reasoning about a feedback system is difficult because the first system influences the second and second system influences the first, leading to a circular argument. This makes reasoning based upon cause and effect tricky, and it is necessary to analyze the system as a whole. As provided by Webster, feedback in business is the transmission of evaluative or corrective information about an action, event, or process to the original or controlling source.



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