



FEEDBACK STRATEGIES FOR THE CLASSROOM



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As teachers, one of our daily considerations must be: ‘how can I ensure each student is making progress in their learning?’ We should be aiming to ensure that each student is making *optimal* progress in their learning.

We spend much of our time designing high quality learning tasks, creating engaging activities and relentlessly pursuing better classroom routines and behaviour management. We consider each of these elements essential to student learning (and so they are) and therefore we plan and evaluate them diligently.

There is another essential element that we often do not plan for or evaluate – feedback. The research is clear that ‘Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement’ (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and yet for many of us feedback throughout the learning sequence is something that happens organically or incidentally. The methods we use to give and receive feedback, and the decisions made as a result of that feedback, are largely unplanned or unexamined.

In this article, I will explore how we give and receive feedback in the classroom.

Feedback

Feedback is what leads to change at every level in the classroom.

When a teacher receives feedback on the progress that students are making, this changes the next step in their teaching. When a student receives feedback on the progress they are making, this changes the next step in their learning.

Every time we get an insight into what our students know, understand or are able to do at any given moment in a lesson, we then make a better decision about how to move forward. Every time our students get an insight into what they themselves know, understand or are able to do at any given moment in a lesson, they can make a better decision about how to move forward.

The Department's [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#) addresses feedback. Strategy 8 says, 'Feedback redirects or refocuses teacher and student actions so the student can align effort and activity with a clear outcome that leads to achieving a learning goal' (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

In this article, I will consider strategies for feedback in two areas:

- feedback **for teachers** - collecting evidence about where students are in relation to an area we want them to master
- feedback **for students** - strategies that can be used during a lesson for students to give and receive feedback

Feedback for teachers

We are often keen to ask our students how they feel about our lessons, seek suggestions for how we could improve our teaching or survey them on what kind of learning activities they might prefer. While this is helpful feedback for teachers, we'll focus here on the feedback we receive from evidence of student learning. This feedback is elicited every time we actively look for an answer to the question 'what do my students know, understand or are able to do right now in relation to the essential learning?'. Professor John Hattie says that when we as teachers take the time to regularly collect feedback – evidence of student understanding – "then the teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful. Feedback to teachers helps make learning visible" (Hattie, 2009, p. 173).

I have written about three approaches to collecting feedback about student learning. The first happens before we begin a learning sequence, the second during the learning sequence, and the third after the learning sequence.

Pre-assessment

Feedback is designed to reduce the gap between what students already know and understand, and what we want them to know and understand. But feedback 'cannot lead to a reduction in this discrepancy if the goal is poorly defined, because the gap between current learning and intended learning is unlikely to be sufficiently clear for students to see a need to reduce it' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 89). So, a first step is to clearly determine what it would look like if students achieved success. What is the intended learning? What are the criteria for success?

A second step is to get feedback from students about how well they have already mastered that learning. We might first consider data already available to us from previous learning experiences or testing. Alternatively, we may design a learning task that will help us to extract this information. For example, if I want to find out how well my students can read, interpret and analyse data then I might provide them with a graph or data set and ask them three to five questions that will help me to assess their skills in this area. It's preferable to keep this pre-assessment short and focussed only on the essential learning.

Questioning – planning the asking and the answering

One of the primary ways we get feedback from students on how they are progressing is by questioning (High Impact Teaching Strategy 7). At chosen points in the lesson we might stop the class, ask some pertinent questions and then - based on responses - make a judgement as to whether we can move forward or not. Questioning is very important and so it makes sense to spend some time ensuring this questioning gives us the information we require.

Spend a few moments before planning your lesson thinking about key questions you might ask. Wiliam and Leahy (2015) call these ‘hinge questions’. Hinge questions are pre-determined questions asked at a key moment that really encapsulates the essential learning. If students cannot correctly answer the hinge question, they are not in a position to continue with the learning. Designing a hinge question involves considering ‘what would my students need to answer correctly at this point of in my lesson in order for me to know they are on the right track?’

Plan how you might get responses to those questions. The traditional hands-up method (which we all fall back on some of the time) tells us very little about whole class understanding as it is the students who know the answers that put up their hands. Find ways to randomize responses and encourage much greater participation in whole class discussion. Dylan Wiliam calls this the ‘No hands up’ approach. You might put icy pole sticks with students’ names on them into a cup and pull one out when a question requires answering. You might use an App on your electronic device that randomly selects students to participate. If you know your class well, simply select someone to answer the question. The greater the range of student participation, the more accurate the feedback, and the more likely it is that you will take a helpful next step in your teaching.

The exit slip continues to be one of the most helpful ways for teachers to collect feedback about learning at the end of a lesson. As the name suggests, students are given a slip of paper (I have used post-it notes successfully) and a short task to complete. It might be a maths problem written on the board that students need to solve. It might be a question asked aloud by the teacher and students write down their answer. It might be a statement you wish students to complete such as ‘I’m still not sure about...’ or ‘One question I still have about this topic is...’. It takes minutes for the teacher to quickly look at these at the end of a class, evaluate whether learning is on track, and determine where to go next. If you ask students to put their names on them, it’s also a helpful way to identify students who would benefit from an opportunity to work in a small group in the following lesson or have some targeted homework.

Feedback for students

During a lesson, we want to make sure there are many and varied opportunities for students to receive feedback on their progress. There is not enough time for you to get around to each student at multiple points in the lesson to give them feedback. Therefore, we must utilise all the agents of feedback in the classroom.

All Student Response System

Wiliam and Leahy (2015) recommend that at least once every twenty minutes we collect feedback that requires all students to respond. It might be in the form of asking a multiple-choice question where students respond with A, B, C or D. This could be done in an App or by having students hold up the card with their response. Mini whiteboards can be used to collect a range of quick, visible feedback. An even simpler way might be to have students stand up if they think a response is true or stay seated if false. You could ask them to move to different sections of the room to indicate their response to a question or statement.

The all student response system serves two purposes. The first is that students get instant feedback about whether they were on track or not with that response. If they are off track this helps to motivate them to try harder, ask more questions or find out where they are going wrong. The second is that the teacher gets a quick snapshot of the entire class which can serve as helpful feedback moving forward. In other words, everyone in the room takes a moment to reflect before taking their next step.

Success criteria for teacher, self and peer feedback

If there are clearly determined success criteria provided for, or developed with, students at the beginning of a lesson, these can be used during the lesson for teachers to provide feedback against the success criteria and for students to give feedback to themselves or to others on their progress.

I can also facilitate this easily as the teacher. After a period of explicit teaching when students have moved into an independent phase of work, I routinely provide opportunities for students to focus on their progress. At an opportune moment I might stop the class and direct students to the criteria on the board. I ask them to look at what they have done so far and consider 'am I meeting the criteria? Can I improve? Is there anything I am missing?

I also provide opportunities for peer assessment where students can share and learn from each other. After another period of independent work, I might stop the class again and have students swap their work over with someone near them. I direct them once again to the criteria and ask them to consider 'is this work meeting the criteria? Can it be improved? Is there anything missing?'. If the conversation is clearly based on the criteria and the feedback conversation is appropriately modelled, the majority of students can give quality peer feedback.

Regular self and peer feedback (with support) is far more effective than the teacher attempting to get around to every student.

Samples of work or worked examples

Providing models of work or worked examples gives students feedback about what success looks like. It helps students to understand what's expected and also allows them to naturally make comparisons between these examples and their own understanding. Give them to students in groups and have them talk about them – what is working well in this sample of work? What could be improved? What questions do you have about it? What other approaches could have been taken?

If you listen closely to student discussion, you will also get plenty of feedback about student understanding. A student who cannot understand, question or comment on a sample of work will not be able to move forward with creating a similar piece of work themselves. You will know whether they are ready to move into the independent phase of work or not after this discussion.

The benefits of increasing feedback

When we approach feedback as we might approach the other elements of our lessons (with careful planning, varied methods and regular evaluation) we will find that our teaching and our students' learning will become more targeted, more effective and more transparent ([Practice Principal 6](#))

The great news is that it is not about adding more onerous assessment tasks to our teaching units or looking at more and more numerical data. In fact, Wiliam and Leahy (2015, p.9) claim that the biggest impact happens with 'short-cycle' formative assessment, which takes place not every six to ten weeks but every six to ten minutes, or even every six to ten seconds'.

Where to from here?

Consider one feedback strategy that you are not currently using and think about how you might build it into your practice. Use it regularly, refine its implementation and reflect on how it improved the quality of the teaching and learning after a few weeks of use.

Some questions to consider

- Before I commence a teaching and learning sequence, what feedback do I need to collect to inform my teaching?
- During my lessons, what are some of the ways that students will be able to receive feedback from themselves, their peers and from me?
- During my lessons, what are some of the methods I will use to get feedback from the students about how they are making progress? What opportunities will there be for them to demonstrate to me (and themselves) what they know/understand/are able to do?
- After a teaching and learning sequence, what feedback do I need to collect to help me evaluate student progress? How will I make sure that feedback improves my teaching for next time?
- Are my students able to successfully reflect on their progress?

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