



September 2012 | Volume 70 | Number 1
Feedback for Learning Pages 48-51

Feedback Is a Two-Way Street

Cris Tovani

The feedback students give is just as important as the feedback they get.

Last year, I spent a lot of time studying feedback. I was trying to perfect the feedback I gave—what I said in student-teacher conferences and what I wrote on papers. My motives were pure. I wanted to say and write the ideal comments that would cause students to dig back eagerly into their reading and writing. I was concentrating so hard on what I was doing, I forgot to focus on the kids.

As usual, a student reeled me in and refocused my learning. Nate was a junior who sporadically attended my first period class. I knew that if his attendance didn't improve, he would fall so far behind that he might fail. I decided that a little feedback on how his attendance was affecting his grade might motivate him to come to class. So in the electronic grade book, I posted zeros for the assignments Nate hadn't turned in. They showed up as *F*s and averaged into the overall points so that Nate could see how his grade was affected.

The next morning, I found a note taped to my computer screen. It was from Nate, and I could tell by the firmly pressed pencil marks and large print that he wasn't happy. The note read, "How are you putting *F*s in for my grades when I'm not even here?" If I ever saw this kid again, I vowed, I'd ask him what else he expected me to do about missing assignments. Ironically, Nate showed up the very next day.

"Nate," I said, "Talk to me about the note you left on my computer."

"Miss Tovani, how can you flunk me when I haven't even tried the assignment?"

"I'm not flunking you," I said. "I just want you to know what happens to your grade when you don't turn work in."

"But I haven't been to class. How can I do the work?"

"Great question, Nate. I'm not sure how to help you. What do you need?"

Nate looked at me for a moment and said, "I need you to help me fix my schedule so I don't have another class the same period as yours."

Ask What They Need

Because I didn't have this feedback from Nate earlier, I had assumed that the 7:10 start time was the reason Nate frequently missed class. Thanks to his note, I got feedback that helped both of us change what we were doing. I was able to help him fix his schedule, and he was able to regularly attend my class.

It dawned on me that I didn't have to say the perfect thing when giving feedback; I just had to ask what Nate needed. Nate didn't need snappy comments from me; he needed help negotiating the counseling system. Lesson learned: Give kids a chance to tell you what they need.

Old habits are hard to break. For most of my career, I thought it was my job to give the feedback. After all, I was the teacher. Students would say or write something, and my job was then to "teach" or "tell" them something that would make them smarter. My professional reading told me that to close the achievement gap, I must give students specific and timely feedback.

Sometimes I was really good about it. I tried to confer with students regularly and provide helpful comments on their written work. But just the thought of trying to give feedback to every student every day was discouraging. It wasn't until I came across John Hattie's book *Visible Learning* that I realized feedback was a two-way street. In a meta-analysis, Hattie synthesizes the research and then ranks 800 instructional strategies in terms of effectiveness. Flipping through the book in search of the most helpful instructional strategies, I found that feedback was number 10—a pretty impressive spot.

I skimmed the synthesis, fully expecting to read once again that for feedback to be useful, teachers had to give it in a timely fashion to every student on a regular basis. But Hattie provided a different insight. Before he compiled his synthesis, he had also thought of feedback as something teachers did for students. He admits his error: "It was only when I discovered that feedback was most powerful when it was from the student to the teacher that I started to understand it better."¹

Too Good to Be True?

The idea that students giving me feedback was more powerful than me giving them feedback sounded too good to be true. If I could come up with a system to regularly collect feedback that didn't require more grading, perhaps that feedback would reveal patterns that would help me adjust instruction to better meet students' needs. The following day, I decided to experiment during student conferences.

I started with Alex, a quiet kid who had stumped me since the first week of school. Until this point, no feedback I had given him seemed useful.

Sitting down at the desk next to his, I said, "Hi, Alex. How's it going?" Alex shrugged his shoulders. Lesson number one—don't start a conference with a question that can be answered with a shrug.

I tried again, "So I see you have a lot of thinking in your reading response journal." Alex responded with a half-hearted "Yeah." Lesson number two—general comments aren't useful feedback.

I paused, wondering what to say next. Thankfully, I spotted a question mark he had written on a sticky note. I asked, "What's the question mark for? "

Looking down at his book, Alex said, "Sometimes I don't get what I read."

"Me too," I said. "What can I do to help you?"

Alex looked up from his book. "Do you see this part right here? I don't know what it means. Sometimes I read stuff, and one word throws me off. What do I do when this happens?"

Just by asking Alex how I could help him, I gave him the chance to give me some feedback about something he needed. His question gave me an entry point for instruction. I modeled some fix-up strategies, and Alex was able to dig back into his reading.

A Structure for Feedback

Feedback can come in many forms. Sometimes I get it by looking at students' facial expressions. At other times, I get it by looking over learners' shoulders and reading their annotations. Learners' questions or opinions help me discover what they need and where they stand.

My teaching is cyclical. I model something and then I let students read, write, or talk about the learning. Depending on what I see and hear, I repeat the cycle, making slight adjustments. Without student feedback, this cycle happens in a vacuum.

The workshop model can provide a structure for building feedback into instruction, ensuring that students do most of the work while I guide and assist their learning. The workshop cycle provides three opportunities to get and give feedback: the opening, the work time, and the debrief.

Feedback During the Opening

During the opening, I share with students the learning targets for the day, usually derived from feedback that students gave me in the previous class.

For example, after I conferred with Alex, I met with several other students and asked them the same question: "What can I do to help you?" Their responses suggested that many of them shared Alex's struggles with vocabulary. I decided to respond with a whole-class minilesson on negotiating challenging vocabulary.

At the beginning of the next class period, I modeled what expert readers do when they encounter unfamiliar words. I asked questions to isolate my confusion, such as, "Why would this character do that?" "How is a covalent bond different from an ionic bond?" "Why would a person risk his life to come to a new country?" Instead of just saying, "I don't get it," students learned to name in the form of a question what it is they don't get. This strategy forces readers to be more active. As a teacher, it helps me see what content they need.

On the board, I posted the following learning target: *I can recognize words and lines that cause me confusion. Instead of saying, "I don't get it," I can isolate my confusion by asking a question.* Sharing this target at the beginning of class ensured that students understood what they needed to learn.

Feedback During Work Time

The longest part of the workshop model is the work time. After I model or share something, students are released to practice what I have taught. While students are reading and writing, I confer with them to gather and give feedback. The feedback I harvest helps me decide what the next learning target and minilesson will be.

One way to start a conference is to ask, "How are you doing with the learning target today?" Following the vocabulary strategies minilesson, I sought more specific feedback by saying, "What words or lines are throwing you off? What questions have you asked to isolate your confusion?"

Such conversations hold students accountable for practicing and demonstrating that they can do what I've modeled. If students have mastered the target, I teach them something new. If they're struggling with the target, I give them more support. I also use conference feedback to establish small groups for students to work on their specific needs.

Reading and writing conferences are great opportunities to get and give feedback. Secondary teachers often shy away from conferring because they don't want to disrupt the mojo of 30 teenagers quietly working. Sometimes teachers at all grade levels confuse monitoring with conferring. When teachers monitor, they watch students work. When teachers confer, they help students learn.

Here are a few things to remember when you confer with students:

- Conferences can be short; sometimes two or three minutes is enough.
- When your class size is 25 students or larger, it usually takes about two weeks to get to every student.
- After asking the student about the learning target, a good follow-up question is, "What have you figured out today?"
- When you don't know how to help a student, ask, "What do you need?"

Feedback During the Debrief

The last part of the workshop cycle is called the debrief. During this time, students have an additional opportunity to share feedback by responding to the daily learning target. Sometimes they reflect by writing in their notebooks. Other times they complete a reading response sheet that asks them to assess how well they achieved the day's learning target, describe some new information they learned from their reading, and reflect on their questions and ideas about the reading.

After students write for a bit, I let them discuss their thoughts with a partner or a small group. While students share, I listen in on their thinking. My notes become another artifact of potentially useful feedback.

The Matter of Time

The most useful feedback is timely. If students give or receive it too late, it becomes irrelevant. When a student tells me that he or she doesn't understand something after the test, it's too late. Writing comment after comment on an essay when kids won't have a chance to revise is a waste of time, too. For feedback to be useful, learners have to have opportunities to do something with it—otherwise, they may become apathetic and frustrated.

I know this firsthand. I've received a lot of feedback in the form of evaluations regarding my staff development work. One sticks out in my mind. The comment was short and sweet: "Next time, have strawberry bagels." The feedback came at the end of the workshop and was not about something I could fix—I didn't control what refreshments the school served. The teacher's comment had no bearing on my work as a staff developer. After reading that evaluation, I decided that I needed to rethink how I was asking teachers to share feedback with me. After all, why bother with an end-of-the-day survey if there was no opportunity or time to do something about the feedback?

So instead of having teachers complete a general questionnaire, I started asking participants to tell me one thing from the workshop they would take away and use and one thing they still had questions about. From these quick exit tickets, I could learn how people processed the information. I could also see misconceptions about things I had said. Most important, I could anticipate future needs and make adjustments.

Using exit tickets with kids is equally effective. Sometimes during the debrief, I ask students to share something they figured out from the day's lesson or reading and something they wondered or were confused about. I don't grade this. I simply look for patterns in thinking. While I read, I reflect on how I might tweak my minilesson for the next class.

Putting Students in the Driver's Seat

To meet students' needs, I need to get feedback as well as give it. It's a two-way street. When students have the chance to tell me what they need, they empower me to revise and rethink my instruction. Such two-way feedback puts students—instead of just the curriculum—in the driver's seat.

Endnote

¹ Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning*. New York: Routledge, p. 173.

[Cris Tovani](#) is a high school reading specialist and English teacher at Overland High School, Aurora, Colorado. She is the author of *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading? Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* (Stenhouse, 2004) and *So What Do They Really Know? Assessment That Transforms Teaching and Learning* (Stenhouse, 2011).