

Feedback and formative assessment: making the difference

Formative assessment enables us to “identify gaps in student learning” (Fletcher-Wood, 2018, p.3). When we formatively assess, we often use our understanding of what students know or can do to provide feedback to learners on what they did successfully and what they could do next to improve further. Feedback can:

- Take various forms
- Be offered at different times
- Be received *differently* by *different* people at *different* times (there’s room for real variability here!)

Fundamentally, formative assessment can have a powerful impact on student understanding (EEF, 2023).

Giving and receiving feedback

Whilst teachers provide a great deal of feedback to learners, John Hattie and Shirley Clarke (2014) suggest we need to consider how this feedback is *received* by learners.

In *Visible Learning: Feedback*, Hattie and Clarke draw on Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory to emphasise how different students can respond differently to teacher feedback. They argue that students with high levels of self-efficacy (belief in their own ability to do something) are more likely to respond positively to feedback from teachers. In contrast, they highlight how students with low self-efficacy often respond positively to what they call “ability feedback” (p.83), where their capacity to do something successfully is praised. However, they are also likely to respond to “disconfirming feedback” (p.83) [which highlights the areas where they need to develop further] with:

- Negative emotions
- Decreased motivation towards the task in question
- A tendency to associate the feedback with their perceived ability rather than effort

Prioritise the positives?

When a student genuinely wants to undertake a task, positive feedback *increases* motivation. Where a student feels that they ‘have to’ undertake a task, they are “less likely to learn through negative feedback” (Hattie and Clarke, 2014, p.86). Whilst highlighting areas for development is an important strategy, we also need to remember the potential value of task-specific positive feedback.

An example from my classroom:

Using ‘Secret Feedback’ to improve self-assessment and peer-assessment:

Visible Learning: Feedback is packed full of practical strategies. However, I thought I’d share one of my own too. Self and peer-assessment strategies are sometimes criticised – I’ve certainly seen colleagues reflect on their own difficulties with peer assessment in blog posts or tweets. However, when done well, their impact can be transformative.

That’s not to say I haven’t struggled with these too. As a secondary English teacher, I regularly set up peer assessment opportunities for students after they’d completed a piece of extended writing. Despite modelling high-quality feedback and providing sentence structures to scaffold peer feedback, our faculty-wide approach was inconsistently effective.

I devised a 'Secret Feedback' approach which I trialled with A-level students. Each class engaged deeply with the mark scheme for a particular exam question and collaboratively devised a success criteria to inform our approach to writing these types of A-level English literature essay responses. Once we completed our unit, the students applied this success criteria by writing an exam-style response. Whereas previously I'd asked students to reflect on their own work before I marked it, I wanted to give them more of an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the mark scheme and to understand what this *could* look like in practice. Rather than developing a 'writing by numbers' approach, I wanted the students to understand that these requirements could be fulfilled in *different ways*.

In line with school policy, I marked the students' responses. However, I informed them that this 'Secret Feedback' would only be shared *after* they had -assessed their own work rigorously. The first time we did this, we focused on one aspect of the success criteria: written expression and structure. I used exemplification materials to demonstrate the differences between different levels of success against the mark scheme and then each student worked on a photocopy of their response. They were asked to:

- Highlight parts of the response that demonstrated success or areas for development that related to that aspect of the success criteria
- Write specific, positive feedback on the successful aspects of their engagement with that aspect of the criteria
- Write a specific target for improvement, followed by an example of it being fulfilled (e.g. if they wrote 'use a relevant keyword from the question in your topic sentence to ensure sharp focus' they would also have to model this with their own example sentence).

As I'd taken a few days to mark the class set of responses, there had been some time between the students initially completing the task and the self-assessment lesson. This provided valuable distance and the sharp focus on one aspect of the success criteria meant they actually recognised improvements they could make. By the time I distributed the 'Secret Feedback' (in golden envelopes, of course!) the students felt confident that they *knew* what it would say. Comparing their self-assessment with the 'Secret Feedback' then gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own understanding of the mark scheme and criteria too. It was a real confidence boost for many, with the accuracy of their own self-assessment developing their self-efficacy too. This also meant that the students became more comfortable with feedback that signposted their areas for development.

Over time, we focused on different aspects of the success criteria, with the students becoming increasingly confident in their understanding of how to apply it in their own writing and when assessing their own work and example responses. The next step was to introduce peer assessment. By the end of the year, I genuinely believe the two classes would have been comfortable taking on some marking for the exam board! They developed the ability to articulate the distinctions between different levels of the mark scheme, the tools to debate with one another about the merits and development points of a response, and honed their own ability to give *and* receive specific, diagnostic, developmental feedback.

Useful tools to make the most of formative assessment

If you'd like to find out more about what high-quality formative assessment can do for your school or classroom, we're hosting Shirley Clarke for an online CPD session on Wednesday 27th September 2023 from 9.30am – 12.30pm. You can book your place here:

<https://event.bookitbee.com/44790/the-power-of-formative-assessment>

One of our fantastic Leaders of Excellence, Claire Shearer (Assistant Headteacher at Forest Lodge Academy), devised a bespoke CPD programme for a L.E.A.D. school which focused on raising attainment through high-quality formative assessment. Claire drew on Dylan Wiliam's approach, but also signposted Harry Fletcher-Wood's (2018) decision tree as a valuable resource for teachers. Harry has kindly shared this on his blog here: <https://improvingteaching.co.uk/2017/10/22/the-evidence-on-feedback-a-decision-tree/>

You can also find out more about other upcoming CPD opportunities related to teaching and learning on our website: <https://leadequatetsa.co.uk/cpd-overview/teaching-and-learning/>

References

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman

EEF (2023) 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Feedback', available from: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/feedback> (Accessed on 7th September 2023)

Fletcher-Wood, Harry (2018) *Responsive Teaching*, Abingdon: Routledge

Hattie, John and Clarke, Shirley (2014) *Visible Learning: Feedback*, Abingdon: Routledge