The Feedback-Friendly Classroom

How to equip students to give, receive, and
seek quality feedback that will support their social,
academic, and developmental needs

Deborah McCallum

Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION

Contents

1

Understanding Feedback

Feedback as Principle and Process

As educators we often view feedback solely as a principle, as something that we as teachers impart to students to help them achieve desired outcomes. It is this principle that guides students to take the necessary steps to achieve favourable outcomes. The teacher directs, instructs, and imparts knowledge and feedback to the student; the student then follows this feedback to achieve the highest outcomes possible. As a principle, feedback becomes viewed as a cause-and-effect variable. The feedback is the cause and student outcomes are the effect.

When we view feedback as a principle, we risk blaming the giver of the feedback when students fail to achieve the set standards. The teacher becomes the sole active variable when it comes to feedback. Also, it becomes impossible for students to affect teaching outcomes. In this "learning" paradigm where feedback is a principle, students have no voice. We fail to recognize student backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, cultures, and learning needs.

Feedback viewed solely as a principle can snowball. More and more individualized and personalized feedback needs to be disseminated and shared with students. Feedback starts to feel like more work that we don't have time for because of all of the teaching we still have to do. It can feel like we spend our nights writing feedback on assessments, and our days in conferences with students. As time goes on, feedback as a principle gets strongly reinforced. Feedback from this point of view can feel like, look like, and sound like a full-time job that must be performed by the teacher in the classroom, and must result in high student achievement.

Certainly, feedback as a principle is important and has appropriate uses in the context of traditional assessments. Feedback is obviously a natural extension of assessment that we cannot ignore, and that does indeed have positive effects on student learning. However, we can extend our understanding of feedback beyond the boundaries of principles and move toward the interconnected processes that have great value in learning.

Feedback is also a process. In fact, it is one of the most powerful processes—if not the most powerful process—we can use to enhance learning. Conceptually, feedback looks and acts differently as a process than it does as a principle. When we view feedback as a process, it becomes interrelated and multi-faceted;

it incorporates many decisions from many people. The fact is that feedback processes are going on all the time within our classrooms. It is up to us as educators to harness these processes to propel learning forward in meaningful ways. If we look at feedback and fail to see the interactive processes at play, then we fail to understand and harness these powerful networks of communication.

In the process of feedback, feedback principles inform and illuminate learning processes. As a process, feedback is continuous. It involves a series of strategies, steps, and mindsets that help students learn. All students have the capacity to learn, and they do learn, regardless of "appropriate" standards. It starts to be about *when* learning will happen and *how* it will happen, not *if* it will happen. The ongoing feedback process built into a feedback-friendly classroom is essential to facilitating this learning. The feedback process should help all members of the classroom bridge the distance between what they currently know and what we want them to learn.

See the graphic on page 11 for a series of steps that make up the feedback process.

In the visual, you can see that the feedback process includes not only the variables of teacher-to-student or student-to-student interaction, but also how student feedback can feed forward to the teacher to influence lesson planning and instructional design. It highlights the processes by which a teacher can extract feedback from student learning, behaviors, assessments, and comments, and can translate this into future learning. It also can be applied to students, and interpreted through well-implemented strategies for students to help each other and improve each other's learning in meaningful ways. As participants of learning within a classroom, we can take this valuable information and feedback and make key decisions on where to go next, because we are all working together.

Feedback is not an end in and of itself, but part of ongoing and interrelated processes. These processes are essential to learning activities and success criteria, and build relationships by weaving together the skills, social interactions, learning goals, and cultures within a classroom environment. It links essential information, literacy skills, digital citizenship, learning skills, and overall expectations, just to name a few components of learning. It enhances and validates student voice, homes in on information literacy skills, and helps students to think critically and manipulate information for new learning.

Feedback and Assessment

As educators, we are accountable for increasing student achievement, and this inevitably needs to be measured through assessment. Feedback is invariably linked with assessment processes. But assessment is an evaluation strategy that provides a snapshot of student learning at one point in time. By contrast, feedback has the potential to bridge learning gaps in student academics, socialization, and development. It goes beyond assessment in that it has great potential to be non-evaluative.

A lot of people equate feedback with assessment. In fact, we often define feedback as what we share with students after they have finished a task or a test that has been marked. In this view, feedback is merely an extension of the assessment piece or the grade that has been handed out. Giving more and regular feedback to students can feel like an extra duty or a task that there simply is not enough time for. We ask ourselves, *When would teaching happen if we were giving out*

Often, when we think of feedback, we think of evaluation and assessment. But the process of learning with feedback is not something that is measured in standardized tests.

Feedback and technology meet in digital environments, including online book clubs, social media, and Web 2.0- or Web 3.0-related spaces where students can connect, give, receive, and seek valuable feedback in digital worlds that extend beyond the four walls of the classroom.

more feedback on a regular basis? This question has embedded assumptions about feedback being exclusively tied to assessment practices. It warrants a shift in mindset away from assessment as the only way to give feedback. We can move toward a feedback-friendly classroom where teachers and students are harnessing social strategies each day to gain quantitative and qualitative feedback for learning and instruction.

Assessment is often used as a basis for the development of our lessons, units, and programming. It provides important feedback in and of itself, and can happen at the beginning, middle, or end of a lesson or unit. However, if we are not careful, assessment can become the driver of our pedagogical practices, when in reality we want feedback to play that driving role in teaching instead. To be meaningful, feedback needs to be ongoing and constant, and students need to be able to work with it. Its validity does not rely solely on its use in assessment initiatives. Its validity comes from how students use it and how meaningful we can make it. Further, we need to leverage the feedback we observe and receive to improve and realign our instructional practices with the learning needs of students.

Feedback between students is also crucial to learning; to regard feedback only in terms of teacher-run assessment would be to ignore the power of the social relationships in the classroom. Each day, students get significant information from each other in terms of answers, procedures, and directions. Nuthall (2007) demonstrated that spontaneous peer talk is a self-generated learning experience in the classroom. This spontaneous talk is not required and, as we know, arises from the activities and learning goals we give to students. We often do not stop to consider the true power of these social relationships within the classroom. Spontaneous conversations have tremendous potential to contribute to the content that students learn. What Nuthall tries to encapsulate is that much of the knowledge students learn from each other is actually wrapped inside the social relationships of the classroom. He goes on to discuss how social relationships change constantly, and how students have to spend time in class maintaining them and changing them. Therefore, the world of the classroom contains much more than the content of the curriculum. As assessment pertains to content, feedback encapsulates assessment and learning via social relationships and personal development.

As more and more schools use computers to employ formative assessment to students, it is important to point out that the technology cannot replace the teacher or the social relationships in the classroom. Regardless of how technology-enabled a classroom is, that it is feedback-friendly is more important. In fact, with tech-enabled computer assessments and computer-based formative feedback, it is even more important for students and teachers alike to become highly involved in the feedback processes. To this extent, technology can actually humanize the teaching–learning process (Ornstein, 2013). Computerized formative feedback does not mean that we abandon traditional anecdotal records, checklists, journals, and other templates for feedback. Observations and conversations need to be equally utilized as part of the assessment of the products. What is most important is that students and teachers can use feedback processes to understand the values and goals of the classroom community and learners.

Consider the following Top Ten points of feedback relationship to assessment (adapted from The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2009):

Good feedback should

1. Clarify what good performance is as it pertains to academics, socialization, and development, and provide ample opportunities to engage with strategies before, during, and after assessment.
2. Encourage deep vs. surface learning. Students interact with learning goals to make key connections and enhance learning through other feedback comprehension strategies.
3. Be interacted with regularly. Good feedback is not just given once and acted upon; it is regularly interacted with by teachers and students. To this extent, we can view it as a driver for learning, and not a measurement of learning.
4. Align with formative and summative assessments; i.e., assessment for, as, and of learning processes.
5. Promote peer dialogue around assessments.
6. Be reflected on.
7. Inform student choice for choosing topics, building success criteria, and making decisions.
8. Support socialization and classroom learning communities.
9. Enhance student motivation and self-esteem.
10. Feed forward to the adapting, planning, and differentiation of further strategies and opportunities in class.

In a feedback-friendly classroom, we are building productive learning cultures where students get to develop their skills, learn new ideas from others, and feel safe to take risks and make mistakes in a non-judgmental environment. The idea that students should receive feedback only in the context of assessment needs to change. We can mobilize the feedback that is already happening in our classrooms to anchor individual learning to classroom goals, routines, strategies, and learning expectations. In this way, we can also work toward identifying the specific needs of each unique learning environment and promote real differentiation that goes beyond assessment toward nonevaluative feedback.

Feedback and the Growth Mindset

We are hearing a lot these days about mindsets in education. Your mindset is a cognitive schema, a mental set that determines how you will organize, understand, and respond to a given situation. In education, we have mindsets that connect with what we think learning and education should be. We have mindsets regarding feedback as well. Some of these mindsets come from traditional views of what we think school should be. A lot of the mindsets that permeate our modern education system include the idea that we are in school to get good grades. The unfortunate thing about grades is that they promote fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2006). They hinder a student's ability to give and receive feedback, and can put undue pressure on the teacher to focus on grades instead of helping students make mistakes and learn from them. According to Carol Dweck, students with a fixed mindset do not believe that they can improve and get better beyond what their brains and behaviors can accomplish. A fixed mindset could look like a student giving up on the learning process after they have made a mistake. A fixed mindset also could look like a student striving to maintain an A and to "look smart" instead of taking risks to engage in new inquiries and try new skills.

We need to let students know that learning is not something that people do well in or poorly in, but that learning will indeed happen, regardless of how the learning goals are met or not met.

With a growth mindset, students inherently understand that they can achieve. Students with growth mindsets are appropriately challenged with their work to grow and learn because learning is going to happen. It is important that we don't push students too far or too hard, as this will only promote a fixed mindset. If our feedback tells students that they just have not met the learning goals, and provides no hints for improvement, then students will believe that they cannot get better, that they cannot reach the success criteria and learning goals. Our feedback needs to appropriately acknowledge the learning that students have already demonstrated and provide explicit descriptive feedback for students to continue to improve. This is the only way to foster a growth mindset in students.

A Growth Mindset for Teaching

We all come to the classroom with our own beliefs about how people learn. We have our own theories about ethnicity, culture, learning styles, academics, development, and how to achieve in the classroom. We still need to make sure that we are doing our best to create positive learning conditions for all students. Regardless of our beliefs, it helps everyone when we believe that all students can and will learn. We help students develop multiple styles of learning and multiple problem-solving strategies that they can use in their repertoires. Our feedback strategies can promote this, without negating the implementation of learning goals and success criteria. Challenging goals must be set for students, as well as new feedback and learning mindsets

A fixed mindset views the path to learning as linear. This mindset worked in the Industrial Era, when the skills and knowledge we needed were directly related to the products being made and sold in a product-based economy. But we now live in a knowledge economy. Today's world is no longer stable and linear, where we will learn fixed skill sets to use in one job for our whole career. Technology provides unprecedented access to information and ways to interact with that information, to add to it, to share it, to manipulate it in ways that humans never have been able to in the past. Giving, receiving, and seeking appropriate feedback, and then knowing what to do about it, is perhaps one of the most important skill sets our students will need as they embark on their career paths.

We need to structure our classroom and activities to acquire diagnostic information about what students know, to learn what they think about and what is important to them. We can organize and embed opportunities in our feedback strategies to help students learn that not everyone thinks in the same way; this is especially important for younger students. We can use feedback strategies to help students understand *how* they think instead of *what* they are thinking about. Growth mindsets point us in the direction of *how* students are going to learn and integrate new information, rather than *what* they are going to learn.

We can help students to identify their feedback mindset and help prescribe key vocabulary, language, and strategies to begin the process of changing our feedback mindsets.

A Growth Mindset for Learning

Learning is messy. It does not follow linear paths, and students do not all come to the table with the same level of readiness, willingness, and other factors that help them learn at optimal levels. Learning should be challenging. If it is too easy, our students cannot develop growth mindsets for learning. On the other hand, if learning is too hard, it will not occur. An appropriate amount of struggle could very well be the key ingredient for making learning challenging at just the right levels. However, in a fixed mindset, *struggling* is sometimes seen as synonymous

with *failing*. At the first sign of struggle, students feel like they should give up, or that it is just not possible for them to learn, get the grade, or meet the success criteria. Students might learn that if they struggle too much and are still struggling at the end of the math literacy block, then learning opportunities are over.

Feedback can help students and teachers to harness the struggle as a natural part of how we achieve in the world. The goal is not to help students avoid struggle, but to help them move through it. Then our job is to help them see the learning they have done. When students can see that they have indeed harnessed their struggles, and indeed have learned, a growth mindset can flourish to help students through the next struggle.

Research demonstrates that when we praise children for performance, they value the performance itself more than the process (Dweck, 2006); i.e., they value the actual task more than their interests and motivations. And why wouldn't they? It is human nature to respond and learn based on reinforcements, and feedback is a strong way to reinforce behaviors, including conforming behaviors.

We want to avoid empty praise and instead focus on giving valuable information about what has gone well and why. In fact, research shows that descriptive feedback is more helpful than evaluative feedback that simply informs students about how well they did (Anastasyia & Smith, 2009). It has been established that detailed, descriptive feedback is the most effective when given alone, without a grade or praise. Further, descriptive feedback leads to the highest levels of achievement. (Black, 1998)

We need to change feedback processes from a judging standpoint to one of understanding (Masters, 2014); we need to change our mindset about what feedback is. As Carol Dweck said:

> When [teachers and students] change to a growth mindset, they change from a judge-and-be-judged framework to a learn-and-help-learn framework. Their commitment is to growth, and growth takes plenty of time, effort and mutual support (Dweck, 2006: 244).

One of our biggest fears, as human beings, is being rejected. In our traditional school system, students can feel rejected if peers are putting down students, their efforts, and their outcomes (i.e., their grades). What students need is an environment where mistakes are accepted and encouraged, an environment that uses feedback in meaningful ways to help students develop a growth mindset about their mistakes. We can use feedback to help instill this sense that students can grow and get better, and that they are always accepted for who they are.

Feedback is going to take place throughout our classrooms whether we acknowledge it or not. Therefore, we can harness our strategies not merely to teach the effective ways to give and receive feedback, but also to build a sense of trust and safety. When trust is enhanced, students feel safe to make mistakes on their learning path. As a result, they will also feel safer to take risks and push their learning; feedback is more likely to be given in meaningful ways, and also accepted and sought in meaningful ways; students will inevitably develop growth mindsets.

Consider our gifted students, or students with multiple diagnoses, autism, processing and executive functioning issues, LDs, visual and auditory impairments, and more. All students require appropriate challenges and appropriate opportunities to struggle.

MindsetWorks© at http://www.mindsetworks.com/free-resources/ has many free resources that you can use in the classroom to promote growth mindsets.