

Why is my feedback not working?!

Natalie Vardabasso, Instructional Designer, Calgary Academy

You have read books, attended free webinars, and even scrounged up the money to attend a fancy, international conference. It's safe to say you consider yourself somewhat of an expert on the topic. In fact, when asked you can easily list off the attributes of quality feedback; timely, specific, actionable, personalized. And yet, after spending an entire Sunday wielding your new pack of flair pens to write high-quality feedback, your students keep making the same mistakes.

You start to wonder, do these kids even care about learning? Am I wasting my precious weekend for nothing?

We have been inundated with catchy infographics and animations that aim to break down this complex instructional strategy into easily digestible pieces. However, presenting feedback in such a catchy, simplified way neglects the more tricky, human side of the strategy. To make feedback work, we need to take a closer look at the potential land mines of human motivation.

Underestimating the addictive power of grades

Though you've likely heard it before, it bears reiterating that descriptive feedback delivered alongside a grade has no more impact than if the student were to receive a grade alone. Why? Grades provide unintended feedback about where each student stands in relation to their peers.

We've all experienced that moment when we hand work back and students immediately turn to their neighbour for comparison. Depending on where they fall along the 100-point scale, they receive either a hit of dopamine or cortisol, and are likely to ride a wave of emotion long before it even occurs to them to check the helpful feedback some poor teacher just spent their Sunday writing.

Though many can agree with this idea in theory, it becomes more challenging to put into practice. Not because it's hard to implement (just remove the score), but because the students will be the most resistant to this change. After all, they've been conditioned by many years of dopamine hits. Just like social media doses out likes, each time they receive their work back they wonder if *this* will be the time they beat out their peers for the top spot. They start concocting illogical theories based off of their last win, like a gambler begins to assert that red is "hot" tonight. *She said she liked my exclamation point, so what if I just use them at the end of every sentence? That should win me a few more points.* It's an addicting game and taking it away is bound to lead to frustration. Dare I say, withdrawal? However, the only thing more addicting than the potential for an occasional win, is the belief that success is inevitable *every time*. Descriptive feedback offers the pathway to this success. However, to use this pathway students need to both receive and understand our feedback.

Our brains are triggered by our relationships

No matter our age, receiving critical feedback can be extremely socially threatening. We tend to view our own actions in a positive light and when someone points out a deficit hiding in our blind spot, it can be devastating. In their book, *Thanks for the Feedback* (2015) Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen describe three main triggers that stimulate our biological threat response and cause us to reject even the most well-intentioned feedback.

The first, is the relationship trigger. If our relationship with someone has proven challenging, we are not likely to trust the feedback they offer us. Perhaps, we also question their credibility which leads us to believe they don't have the right to be offering us feedback in the first place. In John Hattie's meta-analysis research (2007), teacher credibility comes in at a significant effect size of 0.90 and impacts many other instructional strategies, including feedback. With this in mind, we must embrace some uncomfortable reflection questions. Do my students respect me? Do I always practice what I preach? Is the reason my students aren't using my feedback, me?

Feedback demands dialogue

During a webinar I attended last month, John Hattie shared findings from his recent research (2020) that revisited the topic of feedback. His findings suggest that our students only understand a meagre percentage of the timely, specific, and actionable feedback that we provide them. Therefore, the problem isn't that students aren't getting *enough* feedback, but that they are getting *too much* they simply can't use.

This is where we turn to the other two social threats that cause us to reject feedback: truth and identity triggers. Truth triggers, as the name implies, are when we receive information that stands in direct contradiction to what we believe to be true. For instance, if a student puts exceptional effort into choosing more interesting words for their essay and they are met with feedback that says they need to work harder on their vocabulary, they will be struck with the injustice of the statement. In contrast, identity triggers are accepted as truth but in a self-destructive manner. For example, the recipient will equate their mistakes to their shortcomings as a person, thus flooding them with shame and decimating motivation.

When we seek first to understand before being understood, we can see these triggers clearly and avoid them. In short, effective feedback demands dialogue.

A powerful first question to start a feedback conference with is, "What do you want me to notice that you are most proud of?" This ensures that we can start the conversation without jumping to our own conclusions. From there, we can continue to move from a place of understanding by asking questions and guiding students towards opportunities for improvement. By delivering feedback through dialogue we can also be attentive to the telltale signs of shame; slumped shoulders, downcast eyes, or even blatant statements of self-hate. If

this happens, we need to shift gears and support our students to emotionally regulate and get their prefrontal cortex back online so that our feedback has a chance of being heard.

Put down the marking pens

For many of us, feedback was often experienced as a one-way communication for the purpose of justifying a grade. However, when we re-purpose feedback as an opportunity for mutual learning, we can realize its full potential. By embracing dialogue as the medium for feedback we can deepen our relationships with students, support them to take the next steps in their learning, and put down those marking pens to finally reclaim what is rightfully ours. The weekend.

References:

Butler, R. (1988). *Enhancing and Undermining Intrinsic Motivation: The Effects of Task-Involving and Ego-Involving Evaluation on Interest and Performance*. 58(1), 1-14.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1988.tb00874.x>

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102 /003465430298487>

Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2015). *Thanks for the feedback*. Portfolio Penguin.

Wisniewski, B., Zierer, K., & Hattie, J. (2020). The Power of Feedback Revisited: A Meta-Analysis of Educational Feedback

Research. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 3087. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.03087>