Six Attributes of Quality Feedback

Giving feedback is one of several ways teachers may decide to respond to evidence of student learning. We know that when done well, feedback can have powerful effects on student learning. In this reading, you will find six attributes of quality feedback. We have also included examples: practical pointers from teachers to give you a concrete sense of how to give effective feedback in your own classroom.

As you read, think about where these attributes overlap with your current practice, as well as feedback-giving habits you might need to let go of in order to implement these attributes.

Give feedback… that relates student work to the learning goals and success criteria.

In the context of formative assessment, Learning Goals and Success Criteria are what students and teachers are aiming for. Feedback—first and foremost—is about letting students know where they are, *relative to where they are headed*. Effective feedback focuses on the status of student learning, as evidenced by what students say, make, do, or write. If feedback is to be meaningful and actionable for students, it is critical that students have a clear understanding of the Learning Goals and how they will recognize when they have met them (i.e., the Success Criteria).

- When giving feedback about a student error, it is best to help the student identify the error rather than correcting it for the student. The teacher focuses the student's attention on strategies that he or she *has* used successfully (e.g., "Tell me about how you did this part of the work") or *could* use successfully (e.g., "Can you think of a way to fix this problem?") to get learning back on track towards the Learning Goal.

- Feedback is not static. As students progress towards the Learning Goal, the feedback they need will change to be responsive to where students are in relation to the Goal. One of the things that helps teachers align their on-the-fly feedback to the Learning Goal is to keep in mind the Building Blocks that the Learning Goal is derived from. Understanding what is entailed in accomplishing the learning represented by the Building Block gives teachers a clearer sense of how to guide student learning.

Give feedback… that keeps students in the Learning Zone.

Feedback is one of several instructional practices that, when done well, keeps students in the Learning

Zone, while staying out of the Panic Zone. Keeping a student in the Learning Zone involves thinking about what is next for that student. When teachers are clear about the Learning Goal and Success Criteria, they are able to interpret evidence in relation to them and make decisions about next steps and the right level of feedback.

- The "right" feedback for one student may well be the "wrong" feedback for another. Similarly, what is too much information for some students can be just right for others. Teachers who are able to keep students in the Learning Zone know that this is dependent on thinking about the needs of *individual* students. Teachers ask themselves questions like, "What other foundational or contextual learning does *this* student already have?" or "Does *this* student respond better to one or two large challenges or several bite-sized ones?"

- If teachers do not provide enough feedback, the student is still in the dark and does not know how to move forward. If students receive too much feedback, they are overwhelmed and have no idea how to use the feedback. Getting the "just right" feedback is the means for students to stay in the Learning Zone.

Give feedback… during instruction, as part of the overall lesson design.

Feedback should be given while teaching and learning are underway, while students are working towards meeting the Learning Goal. This means that opportunities to give feedback need to be built into lessons. Additionally, teachers watch and listen to students throughout the lesson, noticing unanticipated opportunities to give feedback.

- Building feedback opportunities into the lesson is something teachers can plan for. Teachers tell us they are building more time into their lessons for giving feedback verbally, and at the same time, they are spending less time giving written feedback. Additionally, they make "review and apply" time a priority, dedicating classroom time for students to respond to feedback, either immediately or during the next lesson.

- Teachers may also plan to review student work at the end of a class period and provide feedback to the students at the beginning of the next period. To avoid writing lengthy feedback, teachers can use comment markers, noting where students met the criteria and what they still need to improve on. Or teachers can put a symbol on students' work and post feedback that corresponds to each symbol for all students to see as they enter the class.

- Bear in mind that the purpose of feedback may be different at different points in the learning sequence. For example, towards the start of a lesson, when students are beginning a learning task, early feedback may be appropriate to head off an initial misconception. Later in the lesson, feedback that pushes students to reflect on the effectiveness of their learning strategies might be appropriate.

Give feedback… that students can use.

- Feedback is beneficial when students can act on it to move their learning forward. One of the goals of feedback is to ensure that teachers are not doing the work of learning for the student. To do this, teachers use clear, descriptive language to provide hints, clues, and guidance that can help move student learning forward. Usable feedback should focus on the Learning Goal and Success Criteria, make reference to what students have done well, and suggest next steps for improvement.

- If teachers have taken the time to provide descriptive feedback to students, it is essential that they give students opportunities to use the feedback during the lesson. Remember, too, that how students use feedback is another source of evidence about how their learning is progressing.

- Teachers tell us that making usable feedback part of their practice has meant making changes in both the structure and culture of their classrooms. For example, some teachers have set up systems for students to request feedback when they recognize they need it.

- Teachers find that it is important to structure the classroom so that they can have uninterrupted time with individuals or groups to provide feedback.

Give feedback… that supports students' management of their learning.

When feedback is effective, it casts students as capable managers of their own learning by helping them understand the status of their learning relative to the Learning Goal(s) and to take steps to advance their own learning.

- Teachers tell us that one of the hardest things they have had to do is stop saying just "good job!" or "nice work!" as feedback during lessons. Or if they do make comments like this, they make sure to follow up with specific details about exactly what was "good" about the students' work. If students understand what is "good" about their work, they are able to internalize the knowledge, strategies, or processes they have used in this context and apply them to other contexts in future.

- It is a good idea to check with students whether the feedback provided is adequate for them to take the next steps for themselves. For example, asking questions such as, "Are you clear what you need to do next?" or "Can you tell me what you are going to do next?" will provide feedback to the teacher about students' understanding of the guidance and support offered.

Give feedback… so that students learn to give feedback.

Teachers give feedback that incorporates the insights above not only to move student learning forward, but also to model the process for students. Students see and hear what constitutes effective feedback. Developing this understanding and learning how to give effective feedback to their peers is one important way that students become active participants in the formative assessment process.

- Teachers whose students have become effective at giving feedback have remarked that peer feedback is just as beneficial for the student giving the feedback as it is for the student receiving it. When students give feedback to peers, they internalize the Learning Goal in the context of someone else's work, which often leads to insights into their own learning.

- To foster the necessary classroom culture of trust and intellectual risk-taking for peer feedback, teachers have found it helpful to provide students with specific "conversation starters," verbal tools that convey respect for the peer and their work

(e.g., "I understand why you did X, but would you please explain Y to me again?" or "One similarity/difference between your work and the Success Criteria is _____").

- Developing skills in peer assessment and in providing feedback also helps students to become skilled in self-assessment. When they have to consider other students' learning against criteria, they also increase their capacity to make judgments about their own learning.