

Does it work for more able learners too?

4. Feedback

Introduction

"Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative."

– Hattie & Timperley, 2007

The question of how best to give feedback on learners' work and progress is an important and complex issue. Meta-analyses of research (Hattie, 2008; Education Endowment Fund, 2018) suggest that feedback can have one of the greatest impacts in the classroom on improving learners' performance, yet great skill and precision is required to employ it successfully.

While feedback and assessment are closely linked, they have different educational purposes. Evidence also suggests that where the language and process of feedback are taught explicitly in conjunction with metacognitive learning strategies, this supports learners to become more effective in their learning. The NACE Challenge Framework emphasises the importance of effective feedback for learning in the progress of all learners, including the more able.

What the individual is told and how they feel about how they are performing against any given criteria will shape and inform their attitude and response to the task and their belief in themselves as a learner. Feedback has one of the most significant impacts of teaching strategies (Hattie, 2008) yet the nature of feedback, the timing, appropriateness and relevance for the learner will determine how it is received and the effect it has on an individual's progress. Feedback may not be understood or acted upon by the recipient (Nuthall, 2007) and where it is not specific or individual it may not be perceived as useful and relevant (Carless, 2006). For students who are less successful with an activity, feedback can simply confirm what they already know. For more able learners with a perfectionistic tendency, it may also feel unwelcome because it confirms the belief that their work could always be improved upon and that anything less than perfect is viewed as a failure¹.

Feedback lets us know how we are doing and can help us to understand more clearly what we need to do to improve, learn more and learn better. Research into the use of feedback in the classroom and across the learning environment paints a picture of a strategy that can provide significant benefits in enhancing the learning experience and student outcomes.

In this information sheet – part of our series exploring key areas of current education research and practice – we explore key principles of effective feedback, with a focus on specific implications and applications for more able learners.

¹ Visit www.nace.co.uk/perfectionism for an overview of NACE's work in the area of perfectionism, in collaboration with York St John University.

In practice: what's working?

"Feedback is information given to the learner and/or teacher about the learner's performance relative to learning goals or outcomes."

- Education Endowment Foundation,
Teaching & Learning Toolkit: Feedback, 2018

**"The aim is to provide feedback that is 'just in time',
'just for me', just for where I am in the learning process."**

- Hattie, 2012

Feedback in the classroom has traditionally been given mainly after the learning event. It is often in a written form in response to a written task and may include an assessment mark or grade. This form of feedback might provide positional or hierarchical information about progress against a previous task and/or in relation to peers; however, it does little to help students understand what they need to do to improve.

When written comments are provided alongside a grade, research suggests that students tend to look firstly (and sometimes solely) at the grade rather than responding to the comment. Guskey (2006, 2019) argues that students understand that as higher grade levels are limited, they must be competed for. The hierarchical nature of the grade is familiar to most students, easy to understand and can be perceived as telling them all they need to know about performance unless they recognise the additional benefits that the comments provide. Wiliam (2011) further suggests grades may be a psychological barrier to further learning which requires a reset and restart for the student: *"As soon as students get a grade, the learning stops. We may not like it, but the research reviewed here shows that this is a relatively stable feature of how human minds work."*

Assessment for learning guidance drawing from the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) suggests that feedback should be immediate and "productive". To be effective, feedback should be given at the closest point to teaching and learning, be based on current learning levels, and provide appropriate challenge and development goals.

Effective feedback is likely to be:

✓ **Personalised**

Evidence suggests feedback is a deeply personal process. High-quality, effective feedback requires teachers to hold a balance of knowledge about the individual's current level of learning experience combined with an understanding of the learner's views of themselves as a learner.

✓ **Focused on next steps**

To be meaningful, feedback needs to provide guidance that supports the learner in taking the next learning step – not simply repeating what the learner already knows about their performance.

✓ **Timely and targeted**

Feedback is best given nearest to the point of teaching and should be sparingly used to make it meaningful. It should be focused on challenging tasks and goals as this is more valued by learners (EEF, 2018) and helps to emphasise the importance of effective learning behaviours. The level of feedback given should reflect the amount of support required.

✓ **Part of a two-way dialogue**

At its most effective feedback is a two-way process (Hattie and Timperley 2007) which helps the learner understand more about what they need to do to improve and informs the teacher how they can most successfully support the learner's learning. Oral feedback dialogue is usually more immediate than the written form and so more beneficial. Understanding how feedback has been received and using this knowledge to shape and improve how it is given is essential in ensuring that it is beneficial to the recipient. Where feedback is written, asking learners to identify what worked well and to highlight anything not understood has been shown to improve the effectiveness of learning.

The following gives a summary of the relative strengths of the most commonly used approaches to feedback, together with notes on particular points of interest.

Type of feedback

Whole class / group

What/why?

More generalised, may be focused less on task process and more on behaviours.

Limitations

Research shows that students tend to value this form of feedback less. They don't always see the feedback as being given to them personally, and so are unresponsive to it (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001).

Points to note

Can be effective if used to support collaborative learning and team activities because it doesn't identify the performance of the individual.

Marking and grades

Gives indication of correct response in right/wrong activities.

Provides an immediate indication or confirmation of learning status or position.

Grades often confirm a learning status or position and may simply serve to reinforce current learning behaviours.

Written feedback tends to be very time-consuming for teachers and there is little research evidence that indicates real meaningful impact unless it forms part of a genuine process of dialogue. There is also little evidence to suggest that written guidance improves performance.

Where grades and comments are given as written feedback students tend to focus on the grade at the expense of the comment. It can create a hierarchical culture and limit aspirations.

Type of feedback

Verbal feedback

What/why?

Usually given at or close to the point of learning.

Focused on the learning taking place and next steps.

Can be differentiated to the needs of the individual at that point in their learning.

Is personal to the individual and can promote dialogue.

Limitations

Can be too vague or general comments.

If given too regularly it can be seen as having less value to the recipient.

When insufficiently personalised, students may not see it as helpful in improving learning and performance.

Points to note

Requires thorough knowledge of individuals and how they best receive feedback.

Verbal feedback needs to be given sparingly and at points where it makes a real difference. If given too often the impact can become diluted.

It is important that recipients understand how to actively listen to the feedback given.

Peer feedback

Research focusing on classroom behaviour indicates that students receive more feedback and respond more positively to feedback from peers. (Nuthall, 2007)

We know that there are cognitive benefits in providing opportunities for students working towards or at mastery level in a topic to talk through their conceptual understanding of their own learning and in then self-evaluating it.

Where students are explicitly taught how to deliver feedback, it can improve the learning experience of all those involved.

Peer feedback can be unhelpful in situations where students do not understand the purpose of providing feedback or see their role as providing help to a peer who does not understand the task.

Peer feedback is a strategy that can work effectively for many students including EAL (English as an Additional Language) and more able learners.

A practical example of this can be seen in this [blog post](#) from Dr Robin Bevan, Headteacher at Southend High School for Boys.

What does this mean for more able learners?

“The whole purpose of feedback should be to increase the extent to which students are owners of their own learning.”

- Wiliam (2011)

For Sadler (1989) and others (Matron, Entwistle etc.) feedback can be described as the tool used to narrow the gap between what we currently know and what we need to know. In this model feedback might be seen as a scaffolding process that provides support where necessary and is faded out as competency increases. When working with those who are highly successful in their learning, feedback becomes more about supporting self-analysis of performance than guiding, advising or informing. At an elite level, feedback may be firstly a self-analysis of performance with questions as prompts to guide deeper, more analytical thinking and reflection.

In many instances more able learners may already know some or most of what is being taught. Where the learner's level of proficiency in a subject or topic is more advanced, they are likely to become more aware of how successful their learning is. To enable them to engage effectively in self-assessment and feedback and for these tools to become increasingly a part of the individual's self-regulatory processes, they will need opportunities to practice activities which help them to develop expertise and deepen their learning experience (see this [blog post](#) from Dr Robin Bevan, Headteacher at Southend High School for Boys, for an example of this).

Additional issues to consider

When considering education models such as mastery learning it is important to understand how effectively the feedback provided supports the learner in the different stages of learning, from novice through to competency. John Hattie (2012) suggests a structured, scaffolded approach where the feedback reflects the level of support required at any specific point to support the learner in reaching the next stage.

There is also some evidence, for example Sully de Luque and Sommer (2000), that the student's cultural background may affect the kinds of feedback they receive well and value. It is important to understand variations in perceptions towards and understanding of attitudes towards feedback amongst different groups of students. Talking to individuals about how they perceive feedback practices will help teachers understand how to provide feedback most effectively to students.

It is important to recognise that ill thought-through or misjudged feedback can have deleterious effects, especially for vulnerable students and for those who are perfectionists in their fields of interest and expertise. Highly self-critical students, including some who are more able and exceptionally able, may struggle with feedback that doesn't accurately accord with their views of themselves as learners. Knowledge of the individual is essential in ensuring that the academic and emotional needs of these students are being met effectively through the feedback they are given.

Feedback is a complex part of the learning process and requires deliberate and skilful application. Consistent practices, clear communication and shared understandings will contribute to making feedback a central part of improving learning and increasing students' self-reflection and self-regulation.

Frequently asked questions

When is the best time in the learning process to give feedback?

Most feedback has traditionally been given after the learning event. There is little evidence to suggest that such summative feedback has any significant impact on improving learner outcomes or the student's learning experience. Indeed, grades and scores simply express what has been done and offer little or no guidance for next steps. Written feedback, unless done alongside the learner, may also be too distant to the learning activity to be beneficial and comments may not be understood or remembered (Ronayne, 1999). Formative feedback occurring during the learning process is seen to be more beneficial to individual learners as it can aid the learner in understanding how to perform more effectively and can show what steps to take next. Feedback is an individual process, and knowledge and understanding of the individual is vital in ensuring that the feedback given is of value to the recipient. Where feedback has evolved into dialogue post-performance, it can be analytical and inform and help to shape future activity. This will develop self-reflection and self-analysis, support metacognition and lead to greater learner independence.

Do the same methods of feedback work for all students?

On the whole providing feedback to a group or whole class has little benefit. Research indicates that many students do not see the feedback as being for them and simply ignore it. For some students struggling with the concept or task, whole-class feedback serves to reinforce what they already know or that they are struggling. Feedback is uniquely personal and is effective where the recipient understands clearly how it enables them to progress and learn more effectively. Whole-class or group feedback can help to reinforce learning behaviours but tends not to be effective if it is focused on the task or as a tool for improving individual learner performance.

How often should feedback be given?

Feedback should be given at strategic points during the learning process to provide guidance, direction and the opportunity for reflection. Given too often and it may lose impact for the student. The balance is to know your student and understand what works for them as an individual. Feedback at any level is about knowing what makes an individual tick and knowing what will help them to improve.

Is feedback always helpful for learners?

Research suggests that feedback is helpful where it provides guidance on next steps and enables the learner to reflect and prepare. It needs to be at an appropriate level for the individual learner and accord with their level of expertise in the task at the given time. For feedback to have a strong and positive impact the provider therefore needs a good understanding of the individual.

What are the best kinds of feedback?

There is some evidence to suggest that verbal feedback at the point of learning has the greatest impact. According to the research carried out by John Hattie (2008), feedback is best where it is a two-way process and where teachers seek feedback on their own performance and modify their teaching in the light of what they learn. Research also suggests that more able and more successful learners are often more aware of their own learning behaviours and so a reciprocal/two-way feedback model may be particularly effective for this cohort.

Should I praise the student for their hard work?

For feedback to have a positive impact it needs to be given sparingly and it needs to focus on the learning process being undertaken. Praise may be given for effort, attitude and application, but again sparingly and when it is greater than normal performance. This way it means more and will have a greater impact on the individual's learning behaviour. It should be noted that praise for effort where the learner is already failing may serve to reinforce their view of being unsuccessful.

What role does peer feedback play?

There is currently limited research on the impact of peer-to-peer feedback. There is also some anecdotal evidence from NACE Challenge Award-accredited schools that peer feedback within groups of more able learners can support, guide and enhance student learning. This can occur where the most advanced learners are already at mastery level for a concept and their feedback can support and guide those still working to achieve this level of understanding. Mixed-aged peer learning or peer tutoring may also be beneficial for the less experienced 'novice' learners where the more experienced 'tutor' reinforces their conceptual understanding. For the peer tutoring model to be effective, consideration should be given to training the participants in giving and receiving feedback.

Should we consider whole-school training on feedback?

While most schools include guidance on providing feedback in policy documents (assessment, marking etc.) it is less common for schools to commit to whole-school training. All students, but especially younger children, need a consistency of approach in the types of feedback they are given and the ways in which it is given. The learning environment is particularly important in enabling children to become familiar with and learn how to use and give feedback that is beneficial in improving their performance.

References and further reading

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From the NACE blog:

Using feedback for more able learners to promote self-regulated quality

– Dr Robin Bevan,
Headteacher, Southend
High School for Boys

Feedback for more able learners: three guiding principles

– Dr Keith Watson, NACE
Curriculum Development
Director

The power of effective feedback in remote teaching and learning

– Dr Jonathan Doherty,
Leeds Trinity University

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