

Providing Students with Effective Feedback: Communicating the Goal

As discussed in October's tip, feedback is a powerful classroom practice that can have a dramatic and positive impact on student achievement. Effective feedback has been described as part of an instructional package, an essential component of a dialogue about learning between teacher and student (or student and student, or student and self). Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, among many researchers on the topic of feedback, cite three critical elements of what they term "enhanced" feedback:

- recognition of the desired goal,
- evidence about present position, and
- some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two.

This tip will focus on the first critical element, *recognition of the desired goal*.

The definition of instructional goals begins with curricular documents that delineate essential learnings, indicators, or core learning goals for each content area at each grade level. Armed with these defined targets, teachers go through a complex planning process that includes:

- determining criteria that will indicate student mastery of the learning goal,
- creating assessment(s) to determine student progress toward mastery of the goal, and
- designing appropriate instructional activities to lead their students to an in-depth understanding of the criteria, in order to become proficient in demonstrating their mastery of the goal.

Determining criteria. Determining the criteria of success for a learning goal is reliant on a teacher's knowledge of the content area. The teacher has to have a clear understanding of what success looks like in a summary, a graph, a problem solution, a lab report, an essay of comparison, or other learning goal in order to:

- focus instruction to communicate the learning goal and those criteria to students,
- design an efficient and effective assessment to measure student progress, and
- provide specific feedback to students to relate their current performance to the learning goal.

Gaining this clarity can be a collaborative and iterative process. Teachers can come together in grade-level or content area teams to clarify and confirm what the standard of success looks like. After students have been assessed, teachers can examine this student work together to come to closer agreement on what quality student mastery of the learning goal consists of.

Creating assessments. Davies notes that the design of assessments begins with teacher consideration of the kinds of evidence students can produce, ideally in a variety of formats, to show they have learned what they needed to learn. This focused assessment needs to be able to indicate to the teacher and learners the extent to which the students have mastered the learning goal.

Designing instruction. Many researchers agree that, to promote maximum student learning, a major component of instruction should be the communication to the students of the

learning goal and criteria for success. Chappuis and Stiggins note, "Learning is easier when learners understand what goal they are trying to achieve, the purpose of achieving the goal, and the specific attributes of success. Teachers should continually help students clarify the intended learning as the lessons unfold..."

Chappuis and Stiggins and others cite a particularly effective method to communicate to students the criteria for success of a learning goal: the provision of exemplars, "anonymous samples of strong student performances." By examining a variety of these successful products, particularly when this activity is done collaboratively with peers and with teacher guidance, students can begin to determine the attributes of quality by discerning patterns and formulating generalizations of the critical attributes of the learning goal. They also define what evidence of learning looks like. They begin to create a mental model of what success looks like in terms of the learning goal or standard. Davies notes that this is especially important for students who struggle the most.

The research of Chappuis and Stiggins suggests that, once students have delineated the criteria, they should be given the opportunity to use them collaboratively to evaluate and revise real work samples. Through this process, students plumb the learning goal deeply, and ready themselves to demonstrate their learning by producing their own products. It is only at this point, when students have a firm understanding of the learning goal and its criteria for success, that they can begin to profit from feedback on their work. It is only at this point that descriptive information about how their work relates to the learning target makes sense and enhances their learning. Next month's tip will focus on the most productive ways that teachers and peers can provide this feedback to promote continuous improvement.

Bibliography

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