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The mark of success: Part 1

Feedback is the latest fashion in the world of education, with research showing huge gains in pupil progress. In this new seven-part series Matt Bromley will dissect the feedback craze and examine what effective feedback actually looks like – both for the teacher and the student

On a recent family outing my teenage daughter turned to me and, with a pointed finger, ticked off my attire from head to toe: "Barbour scarf, Joules coat, Ralph Lauren jeans, Chelsea boots..."

A wry smile twitched the corners of her mouth: "You're dressed like me. Are you having some sort of mid-life crisis?"

Her amusement arose from the fact that I'm not what you would call a dedicated follower of fashion. I take pride in my appearance. I have never, for example, left the house in my pyjamas – not even to put the bins out at the klaxon call of a rolling rubbish truck. And I simply do not understand some men's inclination to wear shorts all year round. Smart and presentable, yes. But a fashionista I am not.

Thankfully, I'm in good company. A lack of sartorial elegance has long been a hallmark of the teaching profession. Watch any classroom-based comedy sketch and it is likely the teacher will be wearing brown corduroy trousers, a cream crepe shirt (creased and coffee stained, naturally), and a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches.

But what we teachers lack in fashion sense, we more than make up for in our propensity towards the latest pedagogical trend – Brain Gym, VAK, Thinking Hats, you name it, we've blindly adopted every passing fad.

And now, it seems, it's the turn of feedback...

The feedback craze

Several seminal works of educational research have espoused the virtues of feedback. First came Black & Wiliam's *Inside the Black Box*, then Hattie's *Visible Learning*, followed by the Educational Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Each posited that feedback was one of the most impactful strategies at a teacher's disposal, adding eight months of extra progress every year and leading to at least half a GCSE grade's improvement.

Feedback, it seemed, was the new religion and teachers the world over were told to kneel at its altar.

Soon, Ofsted got in on the act. They began highlighting what they regarded as the effective use of written feedback – particularly in the form of dialogic feedback whereby a teacher and her pupils hold conversations in pupils' exercise books – in the inspection reports of schools they judged "outstanding". Many school leaders drew the inference: to be outstanding they must emulate these forms of feedback in their schools.

Dominoes began falling

Next, schools wrote assessment policies that dictated what, when and how marking and feedback should be carried out and teachers up and down the land kissed goodbye to their work/life balance as they were mandated to mark every piece of work in tremendous detail and keep elaborate records of their assessments in order to show evidence of pupil progress. Stationery-sellers were seen high-fiving outside warehouses as they received orders for tonnes of green and purple pens.

Some types of feedback are more equal than others

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that feedback is the new Brain Gym. There is no doubt, whether we take our lead from the evidence or from our own experiences and common sense, that feedback is important.

After all, if pupils don't know what to improve and how to improve it, then there's little chance they will improve.

But saying that feedback matters is not the same as saying that all types of feedback are of equal value or that feedback is a panacea or indeed a proxy for good teaching.

In this seven-part series, I will argue that our obsession with feedback has led to unhealthy and unsustainable levels of teacher workload which, in turn, have adversely affected teacher retention.

I will argue that we should be pragmatic, weighing energy versus impact – in other words, we should balance the amount of time and effort a strategy takes a teacher to employ with the academic gains it produces for pupils, investing in those strategies that lead to the biggest impact for the lowest investment of energy.

I will argue that schools should abandon "one-size-fits-all" assessment policies and strike a better balance between consistency and autonomy.

And I will argue that better isn't always synonymous with more – in fact, feedback is made more effective if we do less of it but do it more strategically. Let's start by examining the issue of teacher workload...

The beast of burden

In the 2016 report, *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking*, the government-commissioned Workload Review Group said: "Effective marking is an essential part of the education process. At its heart, it is an interaction between teacher and pupil: a way of acknowledging pupils' work, checking the outcomes and making decisions about what teachers and pupils need to do next, with the primary aim of driving pupil progress. This can often be achieved without extensive written dialogue or comments."

The report went on to say that the group's "starting point is that marking – providing written feedback on pupils' work – has become disproportionately valued by schools and has become unnecessarily burdensome for teachers".

There are a number of reasons for this, the report explained, including the impact of government policy and what has been promoted by Ofsted, as well as decisions taken by school leaders and teachers. This is not to say that all marking should be eliminated, they accepted, but that it must be proportionate.

In short, the group argued that quantity should not be confused with quality: "The quality of the feedback, however given, will be seen in how a pupil is able to tackle subsequent work."

The group recommended that all marking should be meaningful, manageable and motivating.

In practice, this means that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, a balance must be struck between ensuring consistency and equality of opportunity for all pupils in every curriculum subject, and trusting teachers to focus on what they know is in the best interests of their pupils in their context.

Health warnings

The government's Workload Challenge (2015) teacher workload survey found that 53 per cent of respondents thought that while marking pupils' work was necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome.

In 2015, a NUT and YouGov survey found that more than half of teachers were considering leaving the profession, with 61 per cent citing "volume of workload" as the main cause of their disquiet.

A recent *Secret Teacher* article in the *Guardian* sought to put some meat on the bones of this debate. The anonymous diarist explained with painful honesty how his school's insistence that he engage in detailed dialogic marking and mark set after set of mock exam papers was endangering his mental and physical health.

Dialogic feedback

Dialogic marking, sometimes called triple marking, is – as I said above – the practice whereby teachers provide written feedback to pupils and pupils are expected to respond in writing to the guidance which, in turn, is then verified by the teacher.

Sometimes pupils use different colour pens to indicate the nature of their response with terms like "green for growth" and "the purple zone" becoming increasingly commonplace. So why has dialogic feedback become so popular?

There is, to my knowledge, no government or Ofsted guidance or policy making dialogic feedback a requirement or even an expectation of schools. Although Ofsted did name-check dialogic marking in some of its reports, the inspectorate has since published a handy myth-buster making clear that it does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders (recognising that the amount of work in books and folders will depend on the subject being studied and the age and ability of the pupils), and that it does not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback.

Ofsted inspectors have been explicitly told that they are not to comment on marking and feedback in their inspection reports – because the evidence of what works best is as yet inconclusive – beyond stating whether or not what they see corresponds with the school's own assessment policy.

The *Teachers' Standards*, meanwhile, say only that teachers should "give pupils regular feedback, both orally and through accurate marking, and encourage pupils to respond to the feedback". This is a vague statement which can be interpreted in myriad ways, not necessarily through detailed, dialogic marking.

Who are we marking for?

Some schools I've visited insist on dialogic feedback because it provides a tangible source of evidence for their quality assurance and performance management processes. In other words, it serves a managerial purpose rather than an academic one. However, in so doing, written feedback becomes a poor proxy for good teaching and is reduced from a pupil-led strategy to a box-ticking exercise.

As well as dialogic feedback, teacher workload has been unnecessarily impacted by some schools' insistence that verbal feedback is recorded in books, for example with a stamp. If we insist on such an approach, we need to ask who are we doing it for? Is it a means of control exerted on teachers by senior leaders – another box-ticking exercise to ensure teachers are towing the line – or is it for parents to prove their child is being taught well?

I can see no benefit for the pupil who already knows they have been given verbal feedback because they were in receipt of it. If it is for control purposes then school leaders need to ask why they do not trust their teachers and what can be done to remedy that situation. If it is for parents, then school leaders need to communicate their assessment policy more effectively and have bold conversations about what's in the best interests of pupils.

As with any questionable teaching strategy, I always recommend we ask ourselves what impact it would have on our pupils if we suddenly stopped doing it. Would pupils notice? Would they make less progress as a result? I suspect not, thus proving it is a misuse of teachers' time for very little, if any, impact.

In fact, as with many of these time-consuming approaches to assessment, it can actually have an adverse impact because it leaves teachers tired and diverts their time and attention away from an alternative strategy that is more worthwhile and impactful.

So if dialogic feedback and verbal feedback stamps do not pass the "energy versus impact" test, what does? How can we ensure marking and feedback are made meaningful, manageable and motivating? We will explore this in the second part of this series. SecEd

• *Matt Bromley is an education writer and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. You can read more advice like that contained in this article in his latest book* How to Learn. *Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk. To read Matt's archive of best practice articles for* SecEd*, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl. The next article in his feedback series is due to publish on May 10.*

Further reading

- *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking, Workload Challenge Working Group Report*, DfE, March 2016: http://bit.ly/2olNzUo
- *Ofsted inspections: Myths*, Ofsted, last updated October 2017: http://bit.ly/2rKBR4d
- *Teachers' Standards*, DfE, July 2011 (updated June 2013): http://bit.ly/1MAWT7n
- *Secret Teacher: I feel stuck in a profession that's making me ill*, *Guardian*, February 2018: http://bit.ly/2r122UM

Image: Adobe Stock

The mark of success: Part 2

In part two of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** looks at making marking meaningful, manageable and motivating

Several seminal works of educational research have espoused the virtues of feedback. First came Black and Wiliam's *Inside the Black Box*, then Hattie's *Visible Learning*, followed by the Educational Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Each posited that feedback was one of the most impactful teaching strategies at our disposal, adding eight months of extra progress every year and leading to at least half a GCSE grade's improvement.

There is no doubt that feedback is important. After all, if pupils didn't know what to improve and how to improve it, they would be unlikely to make much progress. But our obsession with feedback has led to an unhealthy and unsustainable teacher workload which, in turn, has adversely affected recruitment and retention in the profession. For proof of this, look no further than the government's Workload Challenge (2015) survey, which found that 53 per cent of respondents thought that, while marking pupils' work was necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome. Therefore, this week I will explore ways of ensuring that marking and feedback are made meaningful, manageable and motivating...

Meaningful

Marking and feedback have but one purpose: to help pupils make better progress and achieve good outcomes. They might do this directly by providing cues to the pupil about what to improve and they might do it indirectly by providing assessment information to the teacher to guide their planning.

Marking and feedback carried out for any other purpose are not meaningful activities and – as well as being a waste of a teacher's precious time – can distract and indeed detract from this important goal.

The best person to decide which type of marking and feedback to use and when to use it is, of course, the teacher because it is she who will use the assessment information to aid her planning and to support her pupils to make progress. Accordingly, the teacher should be allowed the freedom to determine whether to give written or verbal feedback, and whether to do so in class or in pupils' books.

Although a school's assessment policy may set broad guidelines about how often pupils' work should be marked in order to ensure that no pupil falls through the net, it also needs to build-in sufficient flexibility so that teachers can decide how to do it.

Consistency is important but this does not necessarily mean unvarying practice. While having a set of shared expectations regarding marking and feedback will help everybody to be clear about what is required of them, each curriculum subject should be allowed to determine the detail of the policy for their areas, responding to the different workload demands of their subject and to the differences inherent in each phase and key stage of education.

The nature and volume of marking and feedback necessarily varies by age group, subject, and what works best for the individual pupil and for the particular piece of work being assessed. As such, teachers should be encouraged to be pragmatic, adjusting their approach according to context. This involves trust and, as Henry L Stimson once said, the only way to make someone trustworthy is to trust them. School leaders will soon know if a teacher's practice is ineffective – they don't need to straitjacket all their staff in order to ensure consistency and quality.

In practice, this means that school leaders need to avoid asking teachers to mark at set times of the year because those times might not always be the best times for that subject and that teacher. Instead, schools should ask that teachers mark a set number of times through the year but allow them or their departments to choose precisely when this would be. In so doing, schools can ensure that marking is less frequent but more meaningful.

Schools should also be aware that marking looks very different in some subjects compared with others. As such, subject areas should be allowed to decide what effective marking and feedback should look like for them. Each area may collate examples of best practice to help new staff and to reinforce expectations for existing teachers. But these examples should not be regarded as "the only way" to do things and should not acquire mythic status. Rather, they should continue to evolve over time, and to be challenged.

Manageable

A teacher's job is a complex one and it would be possible to work 24/7 and still not feel that the job is done. And yet there are only so many hours in the day.

It is important that, whatever approach schools take to marking and feedback, they ensure they protect teachers' work/life balances because tired teachers do not perform as well and burn-out can lead to issues with teacher retention – we also know that teacher absences and staff shortages seriously impede pupils' progress.

Marking and feedback should, therefore, be proportionate. Here we return to the "energy versus impact" equation (see part 1): we want to ensure maximum impact for pupils from the minimum amount of energy teachers expend. Any expectation on the frequency of marking should take into account the complexity of marking and the volume of marking required in any given subject, phase and key stage.

As I've said before, there is no doubt that feedback is valuable but we need to decide which one of all the valuable things teachers do are more worthwhile than others and focus on the areas of biggest impact for the smallest investment of teacher time and energy. Put simply, if teachers are spending more time marking and giving feedback than pupils spend on a piece of work then your priorities are wrong and should be changed.

Once a policy is in place, it is important that it is frequently reviewed because marking practices change, particularly in light of reforms to national curricula and qualifications, as well as in response to new research. It may have been tempting to assume that the removal of coursework at GCSE lightened the teacher marking load but in many cases the load simply got heavier as schools introduced more mock exams and other assessment-heavy preparations for terminal tests.

In practice, school leaders need to ensure that teachers are selective in what they mark, rather than expecting them to mark every piece of work a pupil produces and "tick and flick" every page of their exercise books. Marking everything is time-consuming and counter-productive. Feedback becomes like a grain of sand on a beach, ignored by the pupil because of its ubiquity.

Subject areas and teachers should identify the best assessment opportunities in each scheme of work – this might be a synoptic piece that demonstrates pupils' knowledge and understanding across a range of areas, or it might be the exam questions that garner the most marks (for example, the teacher may only assess the 6-plus mark questions, while pupils and their peers assess the 1 to 5 mark questions).

If nothing else, schools should end the pointless practice of tick and flick.

Motivating

Marking should help to motivate pupils to progress. In this regard, short verbal feedback is often more motivational than long written comments on pupils' work.

Indeed, some pupils find written comments demotivating because they ruin the presentation of their work, are confusing, or overwhelming. Once again there's a simple rule to obey here: if the teacher is doing more work than their pupils, they need to stop. Not only is it harmful to teacher workload, it can become a disincentive for pupils because there is too much feedback on which to focus and respond, and/or they do not think they have to take responsibility for improving their work – particularly if they had not sufficiently checked their own work before receiving feedback – because the teacher is spoon-feeding them.

What's more, too much feedback can reduce a pupil's long-term retention and harm resilience. To build retention and resilience, pupils need to be taught to check their own work and make improvements before the teacher marks it and gives feedback.

The feedback should also prompt further thinking and drafting, perhaps by posing questions on which the pupil has to ruminate and act, as opposed to ready-made suggestions and solutions.

In practice, schools need to liaise with pupils on what kind of feedback motivates them best. Evidence suggests that rewarding pupils for their attainment rather than their effort is harmful and counter-productive. Many pupils, when surveyed, say they don't want summative comments, they just want to know how to improve. What's more, many pupils say they don't want praise. They don't need a written affirmation that they're working hard. In fact, many pupils simply ignore the praise when given.

However, what applies to written feedback does not always apply to verbal feedback – in fact, the only time to offer praise, in my opinion, is when giving verbal feedback. Positive verbal feedback can be motivating and certainly improves the learning environment. Written feedback, meanwhile, should focus on what needs to happen next.

More recommendations

In 2016, the government's independent Workload Challenge Working Group recommended that, in order to improve the effectiveness of marking and feedback, governors and school leaders should:

- Use the three principles of meaningful, manageable and motivating to review their school's marking practice as part of an overall and proportionate assessment policy in partnership with their teachers.
- Evaluate the time implications of any whole-school marking and assessment policy for all teachers to ensure that the school policy does not make unreasonable demands on any particular members of staff.
- Monitor their marking practice as part of their regular monitoring cycle, and in partnership with their teachers and governing boards, and evaluate its effectiveness on pupil progress.
- Challenge emerging fads that indirectly impose excessive marking practices on schools.

The group also recommended that teachers should:

- Seek to develop a range of assessment techniques to support their pedagogy.
- Actively review current practice to ensure marking adheres to the three principles of meaningful, manageable, and motivating.

It's not what Ofsted wants

Finally, teachers and school leaders should take note of the latest overtures emanating from Ofsted towers. HMI Sean Harford says that inspectors should "not report on marking practice, or make judgements on it, other than whether it follows the school's assessment policy".

And Ofsted has made it clear that it does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders. Rather, the inspectorate recognises that the amount of work in books and folders will depend on the subject being studied and the age and ability of the pupils.

What's more, while inspectors will consider how written and oral feedback is used to promote learning, Ofsted does not expect to see any written record of oral feedback provided to pupils by teachers.

If it is necessary for inspectors to identify marking as an area for improvement for a school, they will pay careful attention to the way recommendations are written to ensure that these do not drive unnecessary workload for teachers. SecEd

• *Matt Bromley is an education writer and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk. To read the previous article in this series or Matt's archive of best practice articles for* SecEd*, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl. The next article in his feedback series is due to publish on May 17*

Further information

- *Ofsted inspections: Myths*, Ofsted, last updated October 2017: http://bit.ly/2rKBR4d
- *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking,* Workload Challenge Working Group Report, DfE, March 2016: http://bit.ly/2olNzUo

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The mark of success: Part 3

In part three of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** explores the evidence of what works

Several seminal works of educational research have espoused the virtues of feedback. First came Black and Wiliam's *Inside the Black Box*, then Hattie's *Visible Learning*, followed by the Educational Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit.

Each posited that feedback was one of the most impactful teaching strategies at our disposal, adding eight months of extra progress every year and leading to at least half a GCSE grade's improvement. But is feedback in danger of being the next big fad?

To be clear, there is no doubt that feedback is important. It is not the next Brain Gym. If pupils didn't know what to improve and how to improve it, they would be unlikely to make any progress.

But our obsession with feedback has led to an unhealthy teacher workload which, in turn, has adversely affected recruitment and retention in the profession.

For proof of this, look no further than the government's Workload Challenge (2015) survey, which found that 53 per cent of respondents thought that, while marking pupils' work was necessary and productive, the excessive nature, depth and frequency of marking was burdensome.

Last week I explored ways of ensuring that marking and feedback are made more meaningful, manageable and motivating. This week, I will turn my attention to what the evidence tells us works best.

A 2016 Education Policy Institute report called *Teacher workload and professional development in England's secondary schools: Insights from TALIS* said that: "Although the time that teachers in England spend teaching lessons is around the average, it is time spent planning lessons, writing assessments, marking and other functions that is driving long working hours in England."

Time spent on marking and feedback can be time well spent. However, when teachers spend so much time marking that they burn out, or when time is spent engaged in ineffective marking, then something has to change.

What's more, the quality of the marking and feedback that steals so much of teachers' time is often questionable. Indeed, as the *Carter Review of Initial Teaching Training* (January 2015) found, there are gaps in some teachers' capacity "in the theoretical and technical aspects of assessment".

In fact, of all the areas of ITT that Sir Andrew Carter reviewed, "the most significant improvements are needed for training in assessment".

Assessment skills are not sufficiently prioritised in either initial teacher education or CPD. There is an assumption that assessment is a natural intuitive skill possessed by all new teachers but that is, it seems, a false assumption.

Those who cannot assess cannot teach

A report by the National Association of Head Teachers' (NAHT) Commission of Assessment in February 2014 rather boldly proclaimed that: "Those who cannot assess cannot teach."

Assessment, the report argued, is part of every teaching activity and is the means used by good teachers to evaluate progress and diagnose the needs of their pupils. As such, the best marking and feedback are neither wholly formative, nor wholly summative; they are embedded in the classroom, not activities of reflection outside the classroom.

The best marking and feedback also help pupils to engage more fully in their own development and learning. After all, a pupil responds better to new challenges if they understand what they need to do in order to progress and why doing it matters.

What's more, the best marking and feedback are at the heart of every classroom because they provide evidence that guides teaching and learning. The best marking and feedback also provide an opportunity for pupils to demonstrate and review their progress.

Fair, honest, ambitious, appropriate, wide-ranging and consistent

The NAHT report stated that assessment should be fair – in other words, it should be inclusive of all abilities and free from bias towards factors that are not relevant to what the assessment intends to address.

They say that assessment should be honest – in other words, assessment outcomes are used in ways that minimise undesirable effects, are conveyed in an open, honest and transparent way to assist pupils with their learning, and judgements are moderated by experienced professionals to ensure their accuracy.

They say that assessment should be ambitious – in other words, it should place achievement in context against nationally standardised criteria and expected standards, and embody, through objective criteria, a pathway of progress and development for every child. Assessment objectives should set high expectations for pupils, too.

They say that assessment should be appropriate – in other words, the purpose of any assessment process should be clearly stated and conclusions regarding pupil achievement should be valid and the assessment method appropriate to the pupil's age, to the task and to the desired feedback information.

They say that assessment should draw on a wide range of evidence to provide a complete picture of pupil achievement – in other words, it should demand no more procedures or records than are practically required to allow pupils, their parents and teachers to plan future learning.

And they say that assessment should be consistent – in other words, judgements should be formed according to common principles, the results should be readily understandable by third parties and a school's results should be capable of comparison with other schools, both locally and nationally.

Furthermore, the NAHT says that the outcomes of assessment should provide meaningful and understandable information for: pupils in developing their learning; parents in supporting children with their learning; and teachers in planning teaching and learning.

They say that the result of assessment should be to provide information that justifies the time spent on it, and that feedback should inspire greater effort and a belief that, through hard work and practice, more can be achieved.

The feedback loop from engineering

The term "feedback" originates from the field of engineering and was first used, to the best of my knowledge, by Norbert Wiener in 1946.

To Weiner and his fellow engineers, feedback formed part of a loop – it was about the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, but this alone was deemed useless unless there was also a mechanism within the feedback loop to bring the current state closer to the desired state. In other words, feedback was about correction and progress.

Translating this notion for use in education, we can conclude that simply telling pupils that their current performance falls short of where they need to be isn't feedback in the original engineering sense of the term. Rather, to be effective, feedback must also embody a mode of progression for pupils.

In *Assessment for Learning* (2003), Wiliam et al echo this sentiment when they say that: "An essential part of formative assessment is feedback to the learner, both to assess their current achievement and to indicate what the next steps in their learning trajectory should be."

Feedback should cause thinking

According to Shirley Clarke: "To be effective, feedback should cause thinking to take place."

In practice, this means that the teacher should be clear and constructive about pupils' weaknesses, offering suggestions on how they might be addressed, identify pupils' strengths and offer advice on how to develop them, and then – crucially – provide planned opportunities in class for pupils to improve upon their work.

In order to do this well, the teacher needs to articulate clear assessment criteria before pupils engage in a piece of work and ensure these criteria guide the marking and feedback. In other words, if the learning objectives for the work being marked do not specify expectations around, say, presentation, then the teacher should carefully consider whether comments about pupils' presentation should in fact be made.

The most effective feedback requires small incremental improvements of pupils' work. Feedback is most impactful when it is given infrequently – what we might call "quality marking", given for targeted pieces of work and not for every piece.

And feedback also works best when time is given for pupils to act upon it. In fact, the latter prerequisite is the most important. As Dylan Wiliam once said, the only useful feedback is that which is acted upon.

When marking pupils' work, therefore, the teacher should consider the following factors:

- How well has the pupil understood the task?
- What does the pupil know and not yet know?
- What does the pupil need to do next to improve?
- How will the pupil be informed of the required next steps?
- How can feedback help encourage pupils to review their work critically and constructively?

The gap

Dialogic marking is misguided – it is time-consuming and yet often ineffective. But that isn't to say that comment-based marking isn't worthwhile. Indeed, we know from Ruth Butler's research that providing feedback in the form of comments only (rather than giving a grade or a grade and a comment) is the most impactful strategy because it focuses pupils on what they need to do next to improve, rather than on comparing their summative performance with their peers.

However, when giving written comment-based feedback, we need to be mindful of the fact that pupils rarely read comments. A culture shift is therefore needed and that starts with providing time in class for pupils to read and reflect on the comments.

It also involves giving pointed comments – that is to say, brief and focused on the next steps, not long-winded and focused on correcting every mistake. Comments, if they are to be helpful, also need to be specific – pinpointing particular changes that are needed and providing examples. Vague suggestions such as "Details?" are unhelpful.

Comments need to offer something new, too, rather than simply repeating what has been said before. If the same written comments keep reappearing in a pupil's book, it suggests they aren't paying attention to them or don't know what to do with them.

John Hattie says that the best way in which to understand feedback is to consider Sadler's (1989) notion of the "gap". The purpose of feedback, Sadler argues, is to reduce the gap between where a pupil is and where she is meant to be – that is, between prior or current achievement and the success criteria.

To make feedback effective, therefore, teachers must have a good understanding of where pupils are, and where they are meant to be. Hattie argues that "the more transparent (teachers) make this status for pupils, the more pupils can help to get themselves from the points at which they are to the success points, and thus enjoy the fruits of feedback".

Feedback can help to reduce this gap in several ways. First, it can provide cues that capture a pupil's attention and help her focus on succeeding with a task. Second, it can provide information about ideas that have been misunderstood. Third, it can be motivational, encouraging pupils to invest more effort or apply greater skill to a task.

Next week I will continue my exploration of the evidence on feedback and focus on the three questions and four levels of effective feedback. SecEd

• *Matt Bromley is an education writer and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk. To read the previous articles in this series or Matt's archive of best practice articles, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl. The next article in his feedback series is due to publish on May 24.*

Further information

- *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking*, Workload Challenge Working Group Report, DfE, March 2016: http://bit.ly/2olNzUo
- *Report of the NAHT Commission on Assessment*, NAHT, February 2014: http://bit.ly/2rAI3ft

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The mark of success: Part 4

In part four of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** continues his research review and focuses on the three questions and four levels of effective feedback

According to research, feedback is one of the most impactful strategies at a teacher's disposal. It can add eight months of pupil progress every year and result in at least half a GCSE grade's improvement.

But, as with all teaching strategies, feedback is only impactful if it is done well. And yet our obsession with feedback as the cure for all of education's ills, as a panacea for pupil progress, has led to some questionable practices.

Take, for example, some schools' insistence that every teacher engages in dialogic marking whereby she holds detailed written conversations in pupils' exercise books. Or some schools' dogmatic determination that every teacher should assess every pupil at set times of the term and in ways dictated by a whole-school policy, irrespective of whether it is appropriate or helpful for that task, phase, subject, pupil, and teacher.

Strict assessment policies can have a damaging effect on teacher workload and morale without leading to any academic benefit for pupils.

As such, so far in this seven-part series I have explored ways of making marking and feedback more meaningful, manageable and motivating. This week, I will continue to wade though the research and focus on the three questions and four levels of effective feedback...

Feedback thrives on error

As I explained last week, the term "feedback" originates from the field of engineering and was first used, to the best of my knowledge, by Norbert Wiener in 1946. To Weiner and his fellow engineers, feedback formed part of a loop – it was about the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state. But this alone was deemed useless unless there was also a mechanism within the feedback loop to bring the current state closer to the desired state. In other words, feedback was about correction and progress.

As such, we may say that feedback thrives on error. Error is the difference between what a pupil knows and can do, and what they aim to know and do – and this applies to all pupils, irrespective of their starting points. Knowing this error is fundamental to moving towards success.

So how can we ensure that our feedback helps pinpoint pupils' errors and moves them towards success? To do this – according to Professor John Hattie (*The Power of Feedback*, 2007) – feedback must answer three questions and operate on four levels...

The three feedback questions

Effective feedback involves three key questions:

1 Where am I going?
2 How am I going to get there?
3 Where to next?

The first question – Where am I going? – relates to goals. In other words, teachers need to know and communicate the goals of the lesson to their pupils. This is why it is good practice to share learning outcomes and success criteria.

Learning outcomes and success criteria relate to feedback in three ways. First, they inform pupils about the level of performance that is desired, meaning that pupils can track their own performance towards their targets.

Second, feedback allows pupils (and/or their teachers) to set further, more challenging targets once they have attained their previous ones, thus ensuring on-going learning. This requires a reasonable understanding of what progress looks like and is perhaps the most important element of a teacher's pedagogical content knowledge.

Third, if there is no challenge, feedback is probably of little or no value: in other words, if pupils already know the curriculum content and thus find it too easy, seeking or providing feedback will have no effect. Indeed, as we discovered last week, providing feedback of success (i.e. praise) not only has little or no effect, but may also be costly as pupils waste time awaiting the feedback and thus do not go on to new more challenging tasks.

The second question – How am I going to get there? – highlights the notions of progress feedback, or feedback relative to pupils' starting or finishing points, and is often expressed as an expected standard, or attainment as compared to their prior performance. Progress feedback can also indicate success or failure on a specific part of a task.

There are five broad strategies that teachers can use in this phase to make learning more efficient and effective:

- They can clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success.
- They can engineer effective classroom discussions, questions and learning tasks.
- They can provide feedback that moves pupils forward.
- They can encourage pupils to see themselves as the owners of their own learning.
- They can activate pupils as instructional resources for one another through peer assessment and feedback, and peer teaching.

The third question – Where to next? – is more consequential because such feedback can assist in choosing pupils' next most appropriate challenges, and can lead to pupils developing more self-regulation, and greater fluency and automaticity. Such feedback can also help pupils to learn different strategies and processes for a task in hand, and can deepen their understanding of that task, helping them to acquire more information about what has and what has not yet been understood.

The four feedback levels

In addition to the three feedback questions, effective feedback – according to Professor John Hattie – operates on four levels:

1 Task and product.
2 Process.
3 Self-regulation.
4 Self.

Task and product

Feedback at the task and product level is powerful if it is more information-focused (for example, correct or incorrect), leads to the acquisition of more or different information, and builds more surface knowledge. It is often termed "corrective feedback". In practice, task and product feedback may look like this:

- Does the answer meet the success criteria?
- Is the answer correct?
- How can the pupil elaborate on the answer?

Process

Feedback at the process level can lead to providing alternative ways of doing things, thus reducing cognitive load. It can also help develop learning strategies and ways of detecting error, or finding information. It may help pupils to recognise relationships between ideas, too. Examples of process feedback may include identifying errors, learning how to explicitly learn from mistakes, and providing cues about different strategies or errors.

In practice, process feedback may look like this:

- What is wrong and why?
- What strategies did the pupil use?
- What other questions can the pupil ask about the task?
- What is the pupil's understanding of the concepts/knowledge related to the task?

Self-regulation

Self-regulation feedback can enhance pupils' skills in self-evaluation, provide greater confidence for them to willingly engage more with the task, assist the pupil in seeking and accepting feedback, and improve their willingness to try hard and seek out and respond to further feedback.

Examples of self-regulation feedback may include helping pupils to identify feedback for themselves and understanding how to self-evaluate, providing opportunities and awareness of the importance of deliberate practice and effort, and developing confidence to pursue the learning. In practice, self-regulation feedback may look like this:

- How can the pupil monitor her own work?
- How can the pupil carry out self-checking?
- How can the pupil reflect on her own learning?
- What learning goals have been achieved?
- Can the pupil now teach another pupil how to…?

Self

Feedback at the self level is, as the name suggests, about how the pupil regards themselves as a learner. It is natural to assume that positive feedback – in other words, praise – will cause the pupil to think more positively about themselves and their work and that this will, in turn, help improve their motivation and feelings of success.

However, although praise is often used to comfort and support, it can also direct attention away from a task, process, or from the act of self-regulation.

By incorporating praise with other forms of feedback, the learning information can be diluted because praise includes little information about a pupil's performance on a task and provides little help in answering the three feedback questions we explored earlier.

To avoid this, we should keep praise and feedback about pupils' learning separate from each other. Praise may be given verbally and feedback about performance may be given in writing. Alternatively, praise and feedback may be given at different times.

Nine guidelines for using feedback

In addition to our three feedback questions and four levels of effective feedback, Shiite (2008) provides nine guidelines for using feedback in order to enhance learning.

These nine guidelines – which I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing and which act as a useful checklist when we wish to quality-assure our assessment feedback – are as follows:

- Feedback should be focused on the task not the pupil.
- We should provide elaborated feedback (in other words, feedback that answers the questions: what, how and why?).
- We should present elaborated feedback in manageable units or chunks in order to avoid cognitive overload.
- We should be specific and clear with our feedback messages.
- We should keep feedback as simple as possible, but no simpler.
- We should reduce the uncertainty about how to get from between current performance and future goals.
- We should give unbiased, objective feedback, focused on performance not personality.
- We should use feedback to promote a learning goal orientation in our pupils.
- We should provide feedback after pupils have attempted a solution.

In my next article, I will consider how to put the evidence into practice and ensure our assessment policies are fit-for-purpose. SecEd

• *Matt Bromley is an education writer and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk. To read the previous articles in this series or Matt's archive of best practice articles for* SecEd*, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl. The next article in his feedback series is due to publish on June 7*

Further information

The Power of Feedback, Hattie & Timperley, *Review of Educational Research*, 2007: http://bit.ly/2GqU0K5

Image: Adobe Stock

The mark of success: Part 5

In part five of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** focuses on developing an effective school assessment policy

So far in this series, I've argued that our obsession with feedback as the panacea for pupil progress and a proxy for good teaching has led to some questionable, potentially damaging practices.

Dialogic marking and verbal feedback stamps, for example, are a drain on a teacher's precious time and yet there is no evidence that they have any positive impact on pupils' progress.

As such, I have been exploring ways of making marking and feedback more meaningful, manageable and motivating.

Before half-term, I explained that feedback thrives on error – that is to say, the difference between what we know and can do, and what we aim to know and do – and works best when it answers three key questions, namely: Where am I going? How am I going to get there? Where to next?

What's more, feedback works best when it operates on four levels, namely: Task and product (e.g. does the answer meet the success criteria?), Process (e.g. what is the pupil's understanding of the concepts and knowledge related to this task?), Self-regulation (e.g. how can the pupil reflect on their own learning?), Self (e.g. the importance of keeping praise and feedback about learning separate so as not to dilute performance information).

This week, we will focus on how to develop an effective school assessment policy.

Negating the side effects of feedback

Before we consider what should and should not be included in a school assessment policy, we should acknowledge an important caveat: the evidence of what works and does not work is inconclusive.

As I explained earlier in this series, Ofsted has said that it does not expect to see a particular frequency or quantity of work in pupils' books or folders. Rather, the inspectorate recognises that the amount of work in books and folders will depend on the subject being studied and the age and ability of the pupils. What's more, its inspectors have been told not to report on a teacher's marking practice, or make judgements on it – because the evidence is not yet robust – other than to say whether or not it follows the school's assessment policy.

This begs the question, if the evidence isn't sufficient for Ofsted to make judgements on what's right or wrong, how can schools dictate what's right or wrong in their assessment policies?

According to the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), although many studies into feedback show very high effects on learning, there are also studies that show that feedback can have negative effects and make things worse ().

An assessment policy, therefore, needs to acknowledge that the evidence is inconclusive and that not all forms of marking and feedback are effective and worthwhile. Indeed, some feedback can have adverse effects on pupils' learning and progress.

So what do we know? What can we say works best? Research suggests that, in order to avoid any negative effects and to be impactful, feedback should be specific, accurate and clear. For example, "it was good because you..." is better than just saying "correct".

Feedback should also compare what a pupil is doing now with what they have done wrong before. For example, "I can see you were focused on improving X as it is much better than last time's Y...".

Furthermore, feedback should encourage and support the investment of additional effort and be given sparingly so that it is made meaningful. And feedback should provide specific guidance on how to improve rather than simply telling pupils when they are wrong.

Some of the research reviewed by the EEF suggests that feedback should be about complex or challenging tasks or goals as this is likely to emphasise the importance of effort and perseverance as well as be more valued by the pupils.

The EEF says that the quality of existing evidence focused specifically on written marking is low. Very few large-scale, robust studies, such as randomised controlled trials, have – they tell us – looked at marking. Most of the studies that have been carried out in this field are small in scale and/or from higher education or English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, which make it difficult to translate their findings into a primary or secondary school environment.

Some findings do, however, emerge from the evidence that could help teachers and school leaders in their pursuit of an effective, sustainable and time-efficient marking policy. These include the following, which you may consider in your policy:

- Careless mistakes should be marked differently to errors resulting from misunderstanding. The latter may be best addressed by providing hints or questions which lead pupils to underlying principles; the former by simply marking the mistake as incorrect, without giving the right answer – therefore, our policies should make clear the difference between mistakes and errors and how these are addressed through feedback (I'll explore this in more depth shortly).
- Awarding grades for every piece of work may reduce the impact of marking, particularly if pupils become preoccupied with grades at the expense of a consideration of teachers' formative comments – therefore, our policies should specify that we do not expect every piece of work to be marked or for teachers to "tick and flick".
- Pupils are unlikely to benefit from marking unless some time is set aside to enable pupils to consider and respond to marking – therefore, our policies should make clear that some lesson time needs to be set aside for pupils to respond to feedback and improve their work.
- The use of targets to make marking as specific and actionable as possible is likely to increase pupil progress – therefore, our policies should specify that feedback should, on occasion, be written as targets for improvement.
- Some forms of marking, including acknowledgement marking, are unlikely to enhance pupil progress – therefore, our policies should make clear that we expect teachers to mark less but mark better.

Error or mistake?

As I say above, our assessment policies should make a clear distinction between marking an error and marking a mistake. So what is the difference?

Most studies into the effectiveness of feedback make a distinction between a "mistake", which is something a pupil can do and normally does do correctly but has not done correctly on one occasion (we may call it a lapse), and an "error" which is something a pupil cannot yet do because they have not yet mastered it or else they have misunderstood it.

When a pupil makes a mistake, research tells us that it should be marked as incorrect, but that the correct answer should not be provided. One study of undergraduates, for example, found that providing the correct answer was no more effective than not marking the work at all, because providing the correct answer means that pupils are not required to think about the mistakes they make or recall their existing knowledge. As a result, they were no less likely to repeat them in the future.

When a pupil makes an error – when they get something wrong as a result of an underlying misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge – research tells us that the most effective strategy is to remind pupils of a related rule (e.g. we start sentences with capital letters), or to provide a hint or ask a question that leads the pupil towards a correction of the underlying misunderstanding. Simply marking an error as incorrect (as we would if it were a mistake) is ineffective because pupils do not have the knowledge required to work out what they have done wrong and why.

To code or not to code?

Our assessment policies should strike a balance between providing feedback to pupils that helps them improve and protecting teachers' work/life balances.

One way of reducing teacher workload is to use comment banks or marking codes. Common codes used in English, for example, are "sp" to indicate a spelling mistake, "p" to indicate missing punctuation, and "//" to indicate where to start a new paragraph.

Some schools use numbered or lettered codes and provide pupils with a key which they can refer back to in order to see what the mark means.

Research tells us that there is no difference in the impact of coded feedback versus full written feedback, so long as pupils understand what the codes mean, of course. Our policies should therefore permit, if not encourage, the use of time-saving strategies such as marking codes.

Triple marking?

I have already denounced the school-wide policy of dialogic marking. I have argued that writing detailed comments in pupils' exercise books to which they are expected to respond and the teacher is, in turn, expected to comment further, is time-consuming for teachers. I've also argued that there is little evidence it works in terms of leading to significant academic gains for pupils.

It is true that a US study which analysed 600 written feedback journals used in middle school literacy lessons concluded that the use of teacher questions in the feedback helped to clarify understanding and stretch pupils, and that a Dutch study found that engaging in dialogue led pupils to become more reflective about their work, but neither study was able to conclude that written feedback was more impactful than verbal feedback. There is, to my knowledge, no evidence that suggests written feedback is preferable.

Indeed, most of the evidence on effective feedback consistently finds that the specificity of feedback – that is to say, how detailed and focused the feedback is – is the key factor in determining its impact, not whether it is verbal or written.

In other words, providing clear success criteria for a piece of work leads to a better performance and setting clear targets for marking, and then reminding pupils of these before they complete a similar piece of work in the future, is also effective.

Our policies should therefore steer clear of mandating teachers to engage in specific types of assessment and feedback – such as dialogic marking – and focus instead on the specificity of that feedback and what is done with it afterwards.

Short-term or long-term?

Research tells us that short-term targets are more effective than longer-term goals. What's more, pupils make better progress when they are only working towards a small number of goals at any given time. Our policies may, therefore, specify that feedback should include short-term goals and that pupils should not be given too many targets at any one time.

Targets for improvement are also more effective when they are co-constructed with – or constructed entirely by – pupils. Certainly involving pupils in the process of setting targets helps them to better understand those targets and take ownership of working towards them. If nothing more, at least pupils can phrase targets in a language that they understand.

Next week we will look at ways of engaging pupils with their assessment feedback so that they improve their work. SecEd

• Matt Bromley is an education writer and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk. To read the previous articles in this series or Matt's archive of best practice articles for SecEd*, visit http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl. The next article in his feedback series is due to publish on June 14.*

Further information

To access the research summaries on feedback compiled by the Education Endowment Foundation in its Teaching and Learning Toolkit, visit http://bit.ly/2J4XCTP

The mark of success: Part 6

In part six of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** focuses on how to engage pupils with their assessment feedback

Image: Adobe Stock

In this seven-part series I'm exploring the role marking and feedback play in effective teaching and learning.

I have argued against one-size-fits-all assessment policies that mandate teachers to assess pupils at set times and in set ways. I have also argued against burdensome assessment practices such as dialogic marking and the use of verbal feedback stamps which take a lot of teacher time with little impact on pupil progress.

I have explored ways of making marking meaningful, manageable and motivating. I've explained how to make feedback fair, honest, ambitious, appropriate, synoptic and consistent. And I've examined how to make feedback cause thinking, as well as sharing three questions, four levels and nine guidelines that can make feedback particularly effective.

This week I will focus on how, once we've marked pupils' work and given them feedback, we can engage pupils with that feedback.

More is not necessarily better

If pupils are not improving, it is unlikely to be because they haven't had enough feedback, but because they haven't acted on that feedback. If they haven't acted on the feedback, it is unlikely to be because they don't want to, but because they don't know what it means and how to respond to it.

If we mark too often and provide pupils with too much feedback, there's a real danger that it will be ignored by dint of its ubiquity. Pupils will be confused by too many instructions and will act on none of them.

Therefore, the answer to improving pupils' engagement with feedback is to provide less of it but do it better. That's easy to say, but what does "better" actually mean? Well, to begin with, it means giving pupils time to act on the feedback in class.

A recent review of academic literature on the topic, published in *Educational Psychologist*, drew together evidence from 195 research papers that were published between 1985 and 2014 and its findings are worth considering.

The paper, entitled *Supporting Learners' Agentic Engagement With Feedback* (Winstone et al, 2017), argues: "Receiving feedback on one's skills and understanding is an invaluable part of the learning process, benefiting learners far more than does simply receiving praise or punishment."

However, the report cautions: "The benefits of receiving feedback are not uniform across all circumstances, and so it is imperative to understand how these gains can be maximised. There is increasing consensus that a critical determinant of feedback effectiveness is the quality of learners' engagement with, and use of, the feedback they receive."

As I have already argued, in order to be effective, pupils must actively engage with the feedback they receive and make improvements to their work in response to it. As Carless et al (2011) point out: "Unless learners are motivated and equipped to use feedback productively, they may have limited potential to occupy a central role in the feedback process."

More advice

If feedback is to be acted upon, it is important that pupils understand its purpose. Often, pupils know that feedback will help them to improve but know little more and do not recognise the role they must play in improvement. So what can we do?

Keep it focused

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that high-quality feedback – by clarifying what good performance entails and providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired levels of performance – influences pupils' ability to self-regulate, which is a crucial determinant of a pupil's use of feedback.

According to Beaumont et al (2011), Burke (2009), and Jonsson (2013), feedback is unlikely to be used effectively if it is unclear or insufficiently detailed.

What's more, what the teacher decides to comment on affects pupils' engagement with their feedback. For example, as Dowden et al (2013) found, pupils don't make good use of feedback that focuses too heavily on surface features such as spelling and grammar.

The paper in *Educational Psychologist* supports this view. It argued that feedback is more likely to be used if it provides corrective advice, rather than just a judgement of whether the work is "right" or "wrong".

A study by Nelson and Schunn (2009) supported this hypothesis by directly comparing the first drafts of essays written by history undergraduates to the second drafts they wrote in response to critical feedback.

They found that pupils were more likely to put their feedback into practice when the problems had been clearly located in the essay, solutions were proposed, and a summary was presented. This kind of task-specific feedback – that which focuses on what has been done rather than on what could or should be done in the future – works best, they argued, when it is combined with process feedback which comments on the development of skills.

Keep it positive

As well as the content and focus of feedback, differences in the wording of feedback have also been found to impact on its effectiveness.

Blair, Curtis, Goodwin and Shields (2013), and Anna Koen et al (2012) found that feedback was unlikely to be acted upon if its tone was regarded as being negative or insensitive. We also already know that feedback that focuses on the pupil (praise) rather than the work being marked (performance feedback) can harm self-efficacy (see, for example, Schartel 2012).

Keep it simple

As well as being positive and motivational, feedback has to be written in a language that pupils can understand. Although it is sometimes helpful for teachers – perhaps for quality assurance purposes – to use the language of grade descriptors or exam board marking criteria, this can hamper pupils' ability to understand it and therefore to act upon it.

Keep it timely

The timing of feedback can also influence the extent to which it is used. According to the undergraduates in Poulos and Mahony's (2008) focus groups, as reported in the *Educational Psychologist* paper, when work is submitted toward the end of a module, this often means that any subsequent feedback seems irrelevant to them and cannot be acted upon constructively.

"Several other theoretical and empirical contributions," the paper went on, "provided an apparent consensus that when learners have to wait a long time for feedback, they typically engage with it less once it does arrive."

Keep it personal

In studies of undergraduates, pupils believed they were more likely to act on feedback that had been specifically requested and that was tailored. Personalised feedback was also found to be more effective in promoting dialogue between them and their teachers.

In conclusion, giving feedback on its own does not improve pupils' attainment; rather, they must engage with it and act upon it. Teachers can aid this process by ensuring that the feedback they give is focused, positive, simple, timely and personal.

Self and peer-assessment

According to Wiliam (2003), it is very difficult for pupils to achieve a learning goal unless they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to reach it.

It follows, therefore, that self-assessment is essential to learning. However, it is also difficult to get pupils to think of their work in terms of a set of goals.

Peer-assessment, therefore, is uniquely valuable for several reasons – it has been found, for example, to improve the motivation of pupils to work more carefully. Peer-assessment is also valuable because feedback is given in a language that pupils themselves naturally use and understand.

"Their communication with one another," Wiliam explains, "can use shared language forms and can provide tenable models, so that the achievements of some can convey the meaning and value of the exercise to others still struggling."

Peer-assessment is also helpful because pupils often accept from one another criticisms of their work that they would not take seriously if made by their teacher. What's more, peer-assessment helps strengthen the pupil voice and improves communication between pupils and their teacher about their learning.

However, peer-assessment will only thrive if teachers help their pupils to develop the requisite skills. Many pupils will need guidance not only about what to assess but also about how to give constructive feedback.

SAGE advice

Among the academic research that the authors of the 2017 *Educational Psychologist* paper reviewed, they found myriad other ways in which teachers have tried to improve their pupils' use of feedback.

Some tried delivering feedback in audio or video format rather than in written form. Some developed electronic portfolios for their pupils to track their feedback over time. Some used one-to-one workshop sessions. Some gave their pupils access to written guidance and resources. And some used innovative peer-assessment activities.

However, the authors found the empirical evidence of effectiveness of each to be "underwhelming". The authors therefore took a step back and asked a more fundamental question: Why should any feedback strategy work and, in turn, affect pupils' engagement with feedback? The authors then decided to look for common themes and found four such themes emerge, which they called the SAGE processes…

S: Self-appraisal

Self-appraisal is defined by the paper's authors as "the process of making judgements about oneself, one's traits, or one's behaviour". They say this is distinct from pupils making academic judgements about their work. Self-appraisal should enable pupils to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, thus reducing their reliance on the teacher. Furthermore, self-appraisal can also help pupils to develop a questioning approach to their learning and support the transfer of their learning.

A: Assessment literacy

Being literate, the paper argues, requires an individual to possess relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies. Assessment literacy is defined by the paper's authors as the processes of understanding the grading process and of applying this understanding to make academic judgements of their work and performance.

Assessment literacy enables pupils to understand the relationship between assessment and learning, and what is expected from them. It also helps pupils to appraise their own and other's work against implicit or explicit grading criteria. What's more, it enables pupils to understand the terminology and concepts used in feedback and know suitable techniques for assessing and giving feedback, and when to apply these techniques.

G: Goal-setting and self-regulation

Goal-setting is defined by the paper's authors as a process of explicitly articulating desired outcomes, such as achieving a grade 8 on the next piece of work, or demonstrating better evidence of critical thinking.

Fulfilling these desired outcomes typically requires a pupil to adopt goal-directed behaviour, such as increasing the time they spend studying, or discussing their work with a teacher. Therefore, goal-setting contributes to the more general skill of self-regulation – pupils' on-going monitoring and evaluating of their own progress.

E: Engagement and motivation

Engagement and motivation is defined by the paper's authors as being enthusiastic about and open to receiving performance information. This requires a commitment to change and to on-going development, and actually paying attention to the feedback and being prepared to consider it and take it on board.

SAGE

Each of these SAGE processes represented a broad set of metacognitive skills underlying pupils' engagement with feedback. The report's authors argued that, in their research, they found that no single feedback strategy was likely to cover all four processes: instead, a "package" of strategies was needed.

For example, a teacher might use peer-assessment as a means to promote pupils' assessment literacy skills, but might also need to use another strategy if part of the problem related to pupils' goal-setting and self-regulation skills. An effective solution to the problem of pupils' lack of engagement with feedback may be one that, by combining several interventions, maps strongly onto all of the prerequisite skills, they said.

Conclusion

If we are to encourage our pupils to engage with assessment feedback and respond to it in order to improve their performance, we must ensure that our feedback is focused, positive, simple, timely and personal. We must make effective use of self and peer-assessment activities. And we must provide opportunities for our pupils to engage in self-appraisal, we must support their development of assessment literacy, encourage them to adopt goal-oriented behaviours, and to be engaged and motivated by performance feedback. Next week, in the final part of this series, I will consider the future of feedback. SecEd

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Reference

Supporting Learners' Agentic Engagement With Feedback: A systematic review and a taxonomy of recipience processes, Winstone, Nash, Parker & Rowntree, *Educational Psychologist*, Vol 52, 2017: http://bit.ly/2IXNVGY

The mark of success: Part 7

In the final article of his seven-part series on effective feedback techniques and practices, **Matt Bromley** looks at the 'when' and the 'how' of feedback – and putting evidence into practice

Image: Adobe Stock

I will begin this final instalment by exploring two important considerations related to feedback: the when and the how.

When?

The timing of feedback is important because if it is given too early, certainly before pupils have had a chance to work on a problem for themselves, then they will learn less.

If it is given too late, pupils will have moved on to new learning and the feedback will be irrelevant, or they will have repeated the same mistakes and the feedback will not be as impactful as it would have been had it been given in a timely manner.

According to Professor Dylan Wiliam, feedback after a test that includes the correct answer increases pupils' capacity to learn because it enables them to correct any errors in their work. The critical mechanism in learning from tests, Wiliam argues, is successful retrieval. However, if pupils do not retrieve the correct response after taking the test and have no recourse to learn it, then the benefits of testing can be limited or indeed absent altogether.

As such, providing feedback after a retrieval attempt, regardless of whether the attempt was successful or unsuccessful, will help to ensure that retrieval is successful in the future.

Conventional wisdom – supported by studies in behavioural psychology – suggests that providing immediate feedback is best. However, recent experimental results have shown that delaying feedback might actually be more powerful.

In one study, for example, pupils read a text and then either took or did not take a multiple-choice quiz. One group of pupils who took the quiz received correct answer feedback immediately after making each response (immediate feedback); another group who took the quiz received the correct answers for all the questions after completing the entire test (delayed feedback).

One week after the initial session, pupils took a final test in which they had to produce a response to the question that had formed the stem of the multiple-choice question (in other words, they had to produce an answer of their own rather than selecting one from a list of options). The final test consisted of the same questions from the initial multiple-choice quiz and comparable questions that had not been tested.

The study found that taking an initial quiz (even without feedback) tripled final recall relative to only studying the material. When correct answer feedback was given immediately after each question in the initial quiz, performance increased by another 10 per cent. However, when the feedback was given after the entire test had been completed, it boosted final performance even more. In short, the study concluded that delayed feedback led to better retention than immediate feedback.

Although giving the answers to questions straight after a test is still relatively immediate feedback, the benefits of delayed feedback might represent a type of spacing effect.

Ultimately, what matters most when considering when to give feedback is the mindfulness with which pupils will engage with it and to remember that sometimes less is more. Feedback is best given, therefore, just before pupils have the time to act upon it in class.

How

When considering whether to give verbal or written feedback, there is very little research on their relative merits. However, Boulet, Simard and De Melo sought to answer this question in 1990 when they studied 80 Canadian pupils. They divided the pupils into three groups: one group was given written feedback, a list of weaknesses and a work plan; the second group was given verbal feedback on the nature of their errors plus a chance to work on improvement in class; and the third group was given no feedback.

At the beginning of the study there were no differences in achievement. All three groups fell short of the 80 per cent mastery set for the task. At the end, all groups still fell short but the second group scored significantly better.

The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that whether feedback is given verbally or in writing matters far less than giving pupils time to use the feedback in class to improve their work.

However, as I have explained, praise is best given verbally and specific formative guidance is best written so that it can be referred to while pupils respond to it and redraft their work.

Putting it into practice

In part 5 of this series (see link below) I shared some thoughts on what should and should not be included in a school's assessment policy. But, once written, how should a policy be translated into practice? In other words, how can we ensure our good intentions lead to genuine improvements both in terms of teacher workload and pupil progress?

If we don't consider a policy's implementation, there is a real danger it will forever remain an unread document on a dusty shelf.

In February, the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) published a school leaders' guide to implementation called *Putting Evidence to Work*.

In the foreword, chief executive Kevan Collins said: "Schools today are in a better position to judge what is most likely to work in their classrooms than they were 10 years ago. We have access to more robust evidence about which teaching and learning strategies have been shown to be effective – and, as the evidence base has grown, so too has teachers' appetites for it."

However, he also cautioned: "Generating evidence can only take us so far. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how great an educational idea or intervention is on paper; what really matters is how it manifests itself in the day-to-day lived reality of schools."

In short, it doesn't matter what the evidence tells us about the positive impact of feedback on educational outcomes if we implement it badly – and we know that, although there is some strong evidence about the positive effects of feedback, there is also some evidence pointing to the negative effects.

Yes, feedback works but, as with all teaching strategies, it only works when it is done well. And by "well" I mean when it is – to paraphrase the 2016 report by the Workload Challenge Working Group – meaningful, manageable and motivational.

We can only achieve these three aims when we ensure that marking and feedback are not burdensome for the teacher or pupils, and are focused on closing the feedback loop.

Implementation

The implementation process the EEF suggests is as follows. Stages one and two are concerned with building solid foundations.

Stage one is to treat implementation as a process, not an event; and to plan and execute it in stages. The EEF suggests schools allow enough time for effective implementation, particularly in the preparation stage and that they prioritise appropriately.

Stage two is to create a leadership environment and school climate that is conducive to good implementation. The EEF suggests that schools: set the stage for implementation through school policies, routines and practices; identify and cultivate leaders of implementation throughout the school; and build leadership capacity through implementation teams.

Stage three is termed "explore", and involves defining the problem the school wants to solve, and identifying appropriate programmes or practices to implement.

Stage four is termed "prepare" and involves creating a clear implementation plan, judging the readiness of the school to deliver that plan and preparing staff and resources.

Stage five is "deliver". Here, the leaders need to support staff, monitor processes, solve problems and adapt strategies. The final stage is "sustain" and involves making plans to ensure changes are sustained and scaled up.

A process not an event

The key take-away message from this report, then, is that improving our assessment policies and practices is a long-term process not a one-off event. Although it might be tempting to announce to staff tomorrow morning that we are abandoning dialogic marking and introducing a simplified approach celebrating teacher autonomy, by so doing we are in danger of replacing one unworkable system with another, or sowing uncertainty and inconsistency.

One of the examples provided in the EEF implementation report is flash marking and it is worth considering here. Flash marking is the use of codes in the form of success criteria. The first stage to implementing this low-energy/high-impact marking and feedback strategy, the EEF argues, is to identify the problem...

Teachers, they say, spend too much time on ineffective feedback. This has a negative effect on their workload. It also leads to undesirable pupil behaviours. For example, ineffective self and peer-assessment, feedback not developing pupil metacognition, a lack of pupil engagement with feedback, and feedback demotivating some pupils. It can also have a negative impact on attainment with pupils making less than expected progress.

The next stage is to identify the "active ingredients" of the intervention. For flash marking, the EEF recommends removing grades from day-to-day feedback. Then they recommend using codes within lessons in order to provide feedback that is skill-specific. The feedback codes are given as success criteria and used to analyse model answers.

They then recommend that feedback is personalised and used to identify individual areas for development, and that flash marking codes are used to inform future planning/intervention. Fourth they recommend that targets for improvement are addressed in future work that focus on a similar skill, identified by a flash marking code. Pupils will justify where they have met their previous targets by highlighting their work. Skill areas can be interleaved throughout the year to allow pupils to develop their metacognitive skills.

The third stage of implementation is to put intervention strategies into play. This might involve training. The EEF recommends three training sessions over two years, attended by two staff (including the subject leader). Training can then be cascaded to other members of staff.

The first training session acts as an introduction to the theory and principles of flash marking, focusing on how to embed the codes into existing practice. The second training session is for the moderation of work and may involve the use of demonstration videos showing how to use flash marking to develop metacognitive skills and inform curriculum planning. The third training session is a refresher for any new members of staff and an opportunity to share good practice.

This third stage includes the development of educational materials. This might involve online portal access used to share training resources and demonstration videos. It might involve webinars.

Throughout this third stage of implementation, there needs to be on-going monitoring. This might involve the periodic moderation of work via the web portal. And there may need to be on-going coaching, too, and other forms of support including observations, team-teaching and co-planning. The fourth stage is a focus on implementation outcomes.

Conclusions

In this seven-part series I've argued against one-size-fits-all assessment policies that mandate teachers to assess pupils at set times and in set ways because these may not be appropriate to the task, the pupil, the teacher, the subject or the phase.

I have also argued against burdensome assessment practices such as dialogic marking and the use of verbal feedback stamps which steal a lot of teachers' time in return for very little (if any) impact on pupil progress.

I have explored ways of making marking more meaningful, manageable and motivating and explained how to make feedback fair, honest, ambitious, appropriate, wide-ranging and consistent.

I have also suggested that feedback should be given sparingly and distinguish between errors and mistakes, and constitute a small number of short-term targets.

I've said that if we are to encourage our pupils to engage with assessment feedback and respond to it, we must ensure that our feedback is focused, positive, simple, timely and personal. We must also make effective use of self and peer-assessment activities.

I've explained that what matters most when considering when to give feedback is the mindfulness with which pupils will engage with it and to remember that sometimes less is more. Feedback is best given, therefore, just before pupils have the time to act upon it in class. And whether feedback is given verbally or in writing matters far less than giving pupils time to use the feedback in class to improve their work.

So what can we take from this exploration of assessment and feedback?

Simply this: context is all and pragmatism is essential. What works is what works and the best person to decide on this is the teacher. Assessment policies, therefore, need to allow flexibility and autonomy. Dictating when and how feedback should be given can lead to unmanageable levels of teacher workload and be counter-productive to pupils' progress. SecEd

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Further information

- *Putting Evidence to Work*, Educational Endowment Foundation, February 2018: http://bit.ly/2sTfafV
- *Eliminating Unnecessary Workload Around Marking*, Workload Challenge Working Group Report, DfE, March 2016: http://bit.ly/2olNzUo