Effective feedback: A whole-school approach

Too often, teachers lack clarity about what feedback is and how to give it. On top of this, lethal mutations can blunt the impact of effective strategies. In this Best Practice Focus Robbie Burns considers what a comprehensive whole-school model of feedback – the feedback loop – looks like and how it can be implemented effectively.
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Effective feedback: Aiming for long-term consistency

As a profession, we have had a mixed relationship with feedback. Policy over the years has swung from triple marking to supposed “no marking.” This has the potential to leave leaders a little perplexed about how they balance the workload of teachers with high-quality feedback for students. But long-term consistency is always better than short-term intensity. I hope that this Best Practice Focus will showcase that less done excellently is always better than lots done half-heartedly.

I hope to provide a cohesive, whole-school framework that includes a model, cultural conditions, and a set of strategies for effective feedback that might inform what you do.

Avoiding lethal mutations

Of all the pedagogical concepts that need to be correctly understood, feedback is top of the list. There are two reasons. First, feedback is arguably the most critical and powerful aspect of teaching and learning (Hattie & Clarke, 2015; Newman et al., 2021). And next, despite this being the case, it is wildly misunderstood. This first discussion is therefore far from conceptual or abstract, it is deeply practical. If we can be clearer about what feedback is, we can stop the natural drift away from its true essence into lethal mutations (Wiliam, 2011). This “drift” is real. In the same room of teacher and students, the understanding of what feedback actually is can be legion. And it is teachers who have the most differing opinions.

Hattie and Clarke (2015) asked thousands of teachers: What do you mean by feedback? They could divide the answers into 10 Cs, most of which are self-explanatory:

- Comments (on the work)
- Constructive reflection
- Clarification (answering student questions)
- Correction (of mistakes)
- Criticism
- Comments and pros (on a piece of work)
- Confirmation (that they are doing something right)
- Commentary
- Content development (asking of the comments)
- Criterion (relative to standards)

Just skimming this in a moment. They asked you, your colleague, your teacher and student about what feedback is and how it is most meaningful.

Equally revealing is what our students think about what feedback makes a difference to them: they need to know where they are going and where they need to go next. We will come back to this point later.

First, it is important to parse out two common lethal mutations that teachers, leaders, and even some researchers, have about what feedback is in the classroom.

By creating a third element, an objective standard by which we, as teachers, can move from A to B in the curriculum rather than embodiments of a standard.

This is far more powerful, far more purposeful, and far more about bringing about long-lasting change in student learning. The curriculum becomes the standard for success.

2. Getting from A to B

It might be tempting, given what I have described above, to see feedback as something that improves the learner so that they can move from A to B in the curriculum. But this is another lethal mutation.

“Feedback is to communicate an individual status in relation to a standard behaviour or professional practice,” Veloski et al wrote (2006). This summarises much of the work Hattie and Timperley did in 2007 on feedback. They wrote of feedback as “information which with a learner can consider how they can move from A to B in the curriculum. But this is another lethal mutation.

Towards a comprehensive model of feedback

So, if the first lethal mutation was too simplistic and didn’t account for the yardstick of the curriculum and the second didn’t say enough about the learner and their role in giving high-quality feedback, then our final model, or should I say, “loop” should hopefully provide greater clarity (see the diagram on the next page).

First, at its heart, is the curriculum but more specifically, the goals, objectives and success criteria that make up the steps of lessons and units of work over time. When we place this at the centre of any feedback we give, as Hattie and Timperley’s 2007 model describes, we ensure that anything a teacher does is focused on an objective standard of excellence for students to aspire towards rather than their own preferences. This enables feedback to move beyond individual classrooms to be appraised across year groups, key stages, and schools. With curriculum at its heart, feedback
can be refined and developed over time since it is developed to an appropriate standard, it is unlikely to feel fundamentally altered. This means year after year, teachers can gather high-quality models of excellence, build feedback into planning and consider specific tasks to move learning forwards.

Teacher to student feedback in the loop tries to showcase what has already been discussed. Lesson by lesson, unit of work after unit of work, teaching should ensure that learning is as relevant as possible to the learner with curriculum goals in mind. Drawing on Timperley’s 2007 model is helpful here for understanding what sort of feedback helps, when to give it, and what its overall purpose is.

Student to teacher feedback is crucial to enhance the progressiveness in the classroom. When teachers create a culture of effective feedback in their classrooms (we discuss this later) any tasks that design to elicit student understanding, they need to be careful not to conflate performance with learning. We will discuss this further in the next section, but for now it is worth noting that teachers need to know their students and the curriculum well enough to be able to respond to the information their students give them based on learning over time rather than correct answers on tasks. Of course, we can’t see learning, but we can certainly see the effect of it. Designing tasks with this in mind is crucial.

Let us return to Hattie and Clarke’s research (2009) in which students, then teachers, said there were two core aspects of what they saw as effective feedback – where I am and where I need to go next. That’s why the feedback loop is the most coherent model. Taking a lesson from the students in this study, let’s take a closer look at what makes feedback meaningful within the model we have adopted.

Feedback is timely

When teachers design tasks to elicit student understanding, they need to be careful not to conflate performance with learning. We will discuss this further in the next section, but for now it is worth noting that teachers need to know their students and the curriculum well enough to be able to respond to the information their students give them based on learning over time rather than correct answers on tasks. Of course, we can’t see learning, but we can certainly see the effect of it. Designing tasks with this in mind is crucial.

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Feedback is manageable and motivating

Sweller’s cognitive load theory (1998, 2016) has deep applications to the way that we give feedback. Our working memory is limited in its capacity. In lesson time, when we are learning new things, there is often too much to focus on. In a well-designed lesson, if we add several “things to do better” into a lesson and then after the lesson provides several more improvement points, this will overwhelm students. It will also be too effortful and time for the teacher.

The shift to whole-class feedback must keep this point in mind – there is a danger of providing far too many improvement points regarding this strategy. Worse, when overwhelmed by the amount of feedback, students will take only one or two aspects of the feedback and act on those, if they can, or teachers will have no response to feedback at all.

Therefore, feedback must be manageable. Look closely at the big picture curriculum goals. Look Loop: Feedback improves both the learner (with curriculum goals in mind) and the teacher (so teaching is responsive and tailored to student needs) at the learning objective for the lesson. Look at the success criteria. Start here. Did students achieve all of the learning objectives? If not, why? If they didn’t look at the success criteria, which did they miss there? Does a theme emerge across all the books in your class? If so, re-take the power of being feedback before the following lesson. Keep an eye on the two pieces of feedback. A piece of feedback is probably enough for high-quality whole-class feedback. A task to support their application of that new knowledge and monitor this. Effective feedback is that which improves the learner, so that they can get from A to B, and the teacher so teaching is responsive and tailored to student needs.

Effective feedback needs to be timely, manageable, motivating and rooted in a classroom culture where mistakes are okay and teaching is effective in the response to the needs of students.

But of course the feedback loop is the most coherent model where effective feedback can take place. It is to this we will now turn.

Building a culture of high-quality feedback

Hattie & Clarke’s 2009 seven principles of effective feedback cultures (Hattie & Clarke, 2019)

1. “Skill, will and thrill”
It is important to consider how we

can develop the skills students have to be able to respond to our feedback, which is often needed to understand the policies we adhere to. The need not have to be as high as the skills and attitudes to be motivated (the will and ability) that this draws on the “mindsets” work of Dr Carol Dweck (2006)." School leaders: Ensure a strong feedback policy is in place that balances workload with excellence. The power of the better: This should be developed over an extended period of time within your feedback gained from staff about how it is going and what can be developed further. Early years teachers can provide examples of how feedback can be exchanged for stickers or stickers. Monitoring should not focus on compliance, rather on the impact it has on having over learning time. This is why it is helpful to include students in discussions about feedback. Effective feedback is not only the best way to help students to develop. It helps them give high-quality feedback to their teacher and to each other.

Teachers: Deeply understand the approach taken by the school and use it as a guide to how much feedback will be used by the feedback feedback approach and how it develops within the class. Make sure that there is regular time review.

2. Character-focused behaviour systems
Any policy we have about behaviour in the classroom should include developing the character change in this area, it is my view that five of these are essential (see diagram below). If any of these five are missing in teaching, the policy or the strategy being used will struggle to be effective.

1. Normalising error
Making mistakes is normal to feedback being given and accepted. If anything, our current curriculum needs to draw out all of the mistakes students could make so that we are able to explicitly teach why these are wrong and help them to make these mistakes again (Lemov, 2021). This takes time and lots of modelling – however it is worthwhile as it facilitates excellent feedback practice.

School leaders: Assemble and ethos moment can showcase what it means to make mistakes and how we can overcome these. It is always important for students to see their teachers and adults in school responding well to mistakes.

Teachers: You can make errors normal by modelling how you make mistakes and respond to this in the correct way. Affirming student error and proroducing error also supports this development.

3. Mixed ability seating
From my own personal experiences leading teaching, the best seating arrangement is the most important whether it be rows or pods, has always been mixed ability. The underpinning reason directly relates to our feedback loop model when students are sat in mixed ability pairs that are well-selected by teachers they are able to give high-quality feedback to their teacher and to each other. Of course, this can also be done if they are sat in ability seating but it is not as rich nor as meaningful.

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EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback between lessons:

The following three strategies are taken from The Innovating Walking Tour by Tom Sherrington and Oliver Caviglioli (2020). I will explain the strategy and outline the steps in context. More detail and ideas for using each strategy are found in the tables (below and right).

Whole-class feedback

What is it? Teachers give feedback to the entire class about one or a few well-selected aspects of learning.

How does it work? Teachers begin by reading through students’ work in light of the learning objective and success criteria. Then, they reflect on the following lesson in light of the sequence of learning across a unit. Teachers then make decisions about what and where they might give whole-class feedback on. This normally takes five minutes of the following lesson and should always end with them responding through a task.

When is it used? Whole-class feedback happens between lessons but always ends up with teachers delivering some form of feedback following the whole-class lesson. This happens at key moments throughout a unit, not every day.

Best foot forwards:

an outline of three strategies that can be used to move forwards and feedback as actions, including how the tasks can be called “laps” of our classrooms and track our students

Feedback that moves learning forwards

What is it? It is never enough for teachers to simply tell students what they need to improve, this must be coupled with how they can improve their work. Feedback that moves learning forwards is just that: the feedback teachers give students where they are in their learning and where they need to go in order to make progress into an action of some kind.

How does it work? When is it used? During a lesson, teachers can support students to see where they are in their learning in relation to the learning objective and success criteria and then explain what their next steps are. Sometimes this can be done one-on-one, in small groups, or to the whole class. The element being responsible to student need is important. It that the feedback matches the student, but tasks are designed well, if there is lots of formative assessment following lessons, and if teachers have set a culture in their classrooms that they normalise error, then there should be ample opportunity to do this.

Feedback as actions

What is it? An extension of feedback that moves learning forward, the important imbedded here is the way that this is given and the structure that it takes in:

Three feedback strategies:

These three strategies form part of the feedback cluster that every teacher uses to provide feedback to students and enable them to respond accordingly. Of course, there are other strategies that teachers will use to further develop the quality of feedback in their classrooms, but these three are the core elements of what we need to focus on and there is no substitute for this.

1. Develop staff knowledge and understanding.

Improving an aspect of practice whole-school is not an easy thing for leaders of teaching. Teaching habits, if they have been formed over many years, are difficult to shift. The first step is improving staff knowledge and understanding of feedback. Helping staff access the research into what makes effective feedback ensures that they are able to understand the core elements of feedback well and what it is that will improve outcomes for their students.

This can be done through CPD sessions where research presentations can be given in bite-sized chunks through small group work.

Focussing more time teachers spend looking at research and considering how it is either comparable or different to their own practice the better. This means that any later development is led by the teacher and is done in a deeper understanding among colleagues.

2. Improve curriculum planning

The next step I took was to provide the space to review curriculum planning to enhance the quality of feedback. Feedback should never be something that is done ad hoc – lots of it can be planned for in advance. That is why, for example, looking at units of work and considering where whole-class feedback could be given and planning for this is key. It provides the space and time in teacher thinking well in advance and when and why they will give feedback. The more collaboratively this work is done the better. Again, leaders ought to map this into their calendar and consider ways they can be accountable for their planning.

3. Systematically practise core strategies

Once steps one and two are implemented, it is then time to deliberately practise core strategies in the feedback cluster. This can be done in small groups in short sessions. The thing that makes this high impact is allowing teachers to bring their planning and slides with them to sessions so that they can practice the feedback they might give.

It is also equally helpful to give teachers the space to plan their feedback that moves forwards and feedback as actions for the coming lessons. This aspect of planning isn’t always a priority, but it can be very helpful for staff to have the space and time to consider what they want to say next. The more systematic way to ensure that they can support students to know where they are going next.

This can be coupled with time to consider the formative assessment tasks they will give to students and then how they might respond. If teachers are not already doing this then through how they will respond to the information they have gathered forward towards they can be even more likely to be able to make better decisions in the lesson.

4. Monitor impact

Leaders need to monitor the impact of the CPD that teachers have engaged in and the policies that have been developed. They did not suddenly have a class walking, book scrutiny and pupil voice at regular intervals. Quite often they moved the practice gazing on across the school that could be shared. At other times they developed a practice of giving one-to-one support for feedback practice where things could be improved.

What next?

As an area we have noted we need to improve on this academic year is student understanding of feedback, the thrill aspect of the feedback culture we are trying to develop. Now that teachers have a strong understanding of feedback, it is time to consider how we can more fully develop student thinking and what makes a great learner in this area. But that I shall leave for another time!