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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

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 far better than lots done half-heartedly.

I hope to provide a cohesive, whole-school framework that includes a model, cultural conditions, and a core 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, 2019; 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 (2019) 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
 - Cons and pros (on a piece of work)
 - Confirmation (that they are doing something right)
 - Commentary
 - Content development (asking about the comments)
 - Criterion (relative to standards)
- Just soak this in for a moment. Think about your corridor of teachers, your school of teachers – if we replicated this research in our own schools, how many

different answers would we have? If every teacher thinks differently about feedback they will act on this belief differently and students will get a very different experience and possibly very different outcomes.

Hattie and Clarke didn’t stop there. After asking teachers, they then asked thousands of students the same question and the response, almost unanimously, was: “Feedback helps me know where to go and what to do next.”

When students were asked about the 10 Cs, they said that these were not feedback. In other words, the only time students, particularly primary age, felt like they were receiving feedback from their teacher was when they were told what their next steps were and how they could get there.

The other things teachers said were, to them, not as important or significant to their perception of their learning.

So what does this suggest? Well, the first point is that teachers lack clarity about what feedback is and how to give it. Next, there are differences in perception between teacher and student about what feedback is and when 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. We can then describe a more robust, coherent model of feedback.

Lethal mutations to avoid 1, Feedback improves the learner

Definitions of feedback of this kind abound. Butler and Winne (1995) wrote of feedback as “information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune or restructure information in memory”. They list how this information can affect all aspects of cognition, in accordance with the type of feedback that is given.

Archer (2010) echoes much of this, stating: “Effective feedback could be defined as feedback in which information about previous performance is used to promote positive and desirable development.”

This understanding of feedback is pretty simple: I, teacher, give

you, student, information in a lesson, which you act on. Once I have looked at your work, I will then tell you how you can get better.

There are two errors with this. First, if this is our model for what feedback is, our students become entirely dependent on us as teachers. Students will, over time, become reliant on us to tell them if they are doing well or not. They risk becoming entirely motivated by our praise, rather than taking ownership of their own learning.

Second, this dependence on us to give them feedback creates the illusion that we are the objective standard for what good learning looks like rather than the curriculum goals and model work of past students.

By creating a third element, an objective standard beyond ourselves as teachers to focus our students’ attention, we become stewards of the curriculum rather than embodiments of a standard. This is far more powerful, far more purposeful, and far more able to bring about long-lasting change in student learning. The curriculum becomes the standard for success.

2, Getting from A to B

It might be tempting then, 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

Responsiveness and feedback: The author’s development of Chiles’ (2021) visualisation of Hattie & Timperley’s (2007) Model of Feedback



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their seminal paper *The power of feedback* (2007). Chiles (2021) helpfully created a visual diagram to describe this model of effective feedback, which I have developed further (below).

Do not misunderstand my argument. The model above is extensively researched and seen as the most comprehensive model of effective feedback to date.

Its strengths lie in its precision about how feedback can be given and what it can be aimed at. The four levels of feedback are a useful framing tool when teachers consider the sorts of feedback they ought to give (and when).

It also helpfully streamlines the purposes of feedback for teachers. It provides clarity about feedback always being about objectives, success criteria and wider curriculum goals.

However, it does not address a crucial aspect of feedback – responding to student need and

the feedback we receive from them as learners.

As such, seeing the original model as the sum total of “feedback” has the potential to create a lock-step approach to teaching and learning: one where I as teacher give feedback to students who then improve (Allen et al, 2021).

I might think through what sort of feedback I give and when I give it, but I don’t have anything in my model of feedback that supports me to interpret and analyse feedback that my students give me about their learning.

The danger of this is that we simply progress through the curriculum, lesson by lesson, without any thought as to how I might adapt and change, respond and reteach content that is not understood.

Therefore, despite its seminal status, it is my view that the model does not go far enough in creating conceptual clarity about feedback.

Feedback in the classroom is more complex. We need models that replicate this to frame any development work we do.

It might be said that what I am referring to here – responsiveness – is a separate concept, maybe known as formative assessment (Wiliam, 2011), checking for understanding (Lemov, 2022), or even responsive teaching (Fletcher-Wood, 2018).

But crucially, it is important that

the premise of both of these ideas is deeply interwoven. We should draw the concepts of “responsiveness” and “feedback” more closely together into one model. Following Allison and Tharby (2015) and Payne and Scott (2017), this might be called the feedback loop.

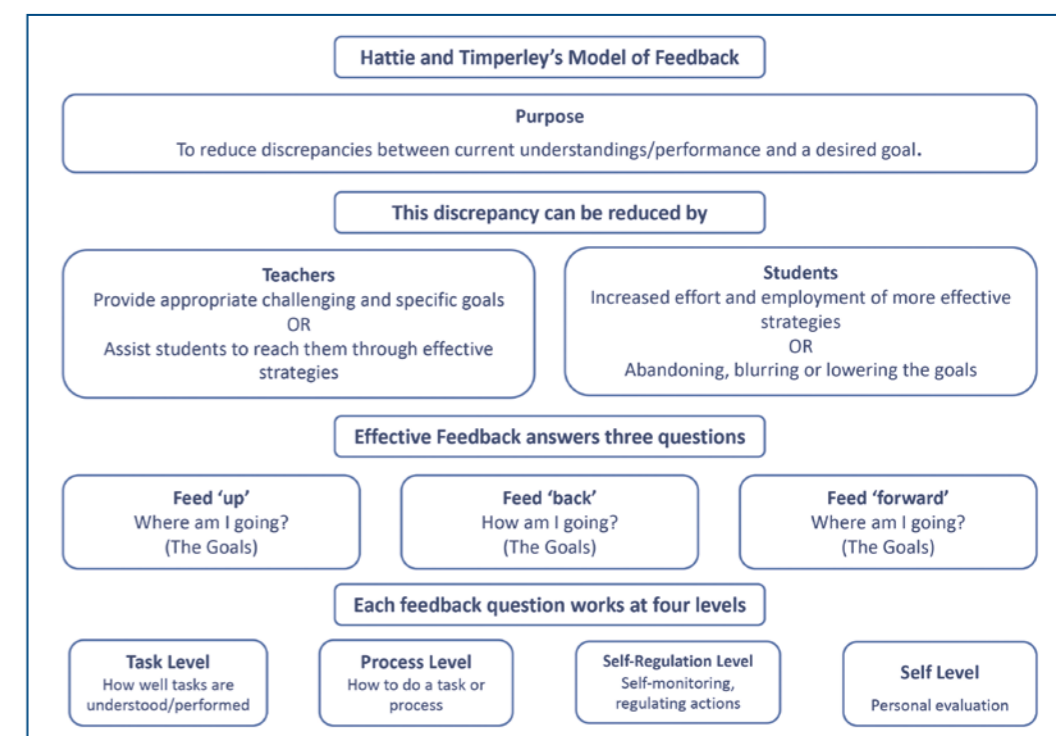
Towards a comprehensive model of feedback

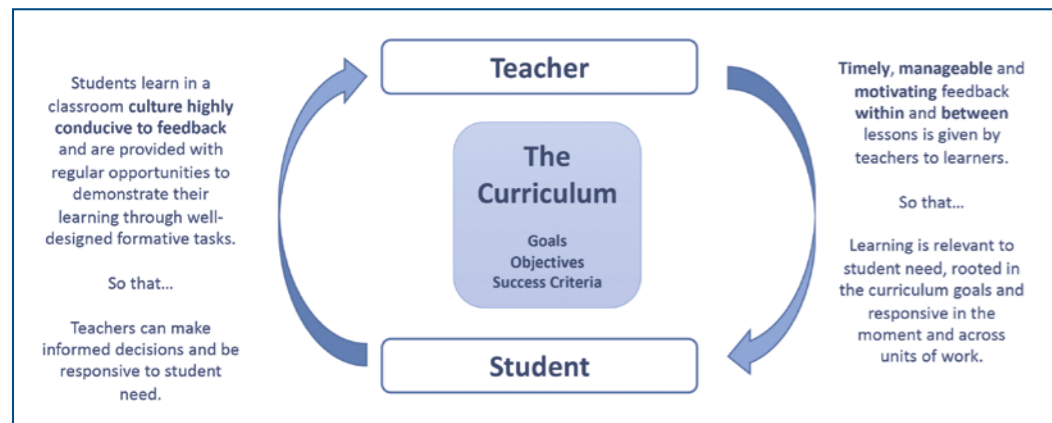
So, if the first lethal mutation was too simplistic and didn’t account for the yard-stick of the curriculum and the second didn’t say enough about the learner and their role in giving high-quality feedback, then our final model, or should I say, “loop” should hopefully provide greater clarity (see the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





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 not? If they didn't look at the success criteria, which bit did they miss there? Does a theme emerge across all the books in your class? If so, reteach that key bit of learning before the following lesson.

One piece of feedback on one piece of learning is probably enough for high-quality whole-class feedback, then design 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 responsive to the needs of students.

But of course the feedback loop needs to be rooted in a culture where effective feedback can take place. It is to this we will now turn.

Building a culture of high-quality feedback

Hattie & Clarke (2019) propose seven principles of effective feedback cultures. Through my reading and experience of leading change in this area, it is my view that five of these seven 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, 'Skill, will and thrill'

It is important to consider how we

can be refined and developed over time since once it is developed to an appropriate standard, it is unlikely to be 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.

Once again Hattie and Timperley's 2007 model is helpful here for understanding what sort of feedback to give, when to give it, and what its overall purpose is.

Student to teacher feedback is crucial to enable responsiveness in the classroom. When teachers create a culture for effective feedback in their classrooms (we discuss this later) any tasks that they design to elicit student understanding will be well-received and used by students to showcase what they know.

At this point, teachers can then analyse these responses, checking student understanding, and then adapt teaching to support the next steps for the learning of the class. By always keeping an eye on the wider curriculum goals, objectives for the lesson and success criteria, they can consider the best strategies to deploy in that moment to support their students to make accelerated progress.

This model is comprehensive but simple enough to be able to use with teachers to support their development of feedback. It is not without its problems though. To avoid lethal mutation, let me explain a crucial one.

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.

Let us return to Hattie and Clarke's research (2019) in which students, thousands of them, said there are two core aspects of what they saw as effective feedback – where I am now and where I need to go next. That's why the feedback loop is the most coherent model. Taking a lead 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

Wherever possible, it is important to give students feedback as close to the learning episode as possible (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Early years colleagues know this intuitively. It is useless to provide feedback to children in nursery and reception through two stars and a wish. They need their teacher to observe the learning taking place and provide feedback on what is being done to move learning forward. If feedback happens even an hour later, it is too late. Students will have forgotten what they did (and how). This can be a rule of thumb for us all.

By giving feedback as much as possible in the lesson, we are able to move learning forward faster. If we wait to give feedback until the next lesson or even later, learning

has already moved on. More worryingly, some misconceptions might have become embedded in memory and will as such be more complicated to address later on.

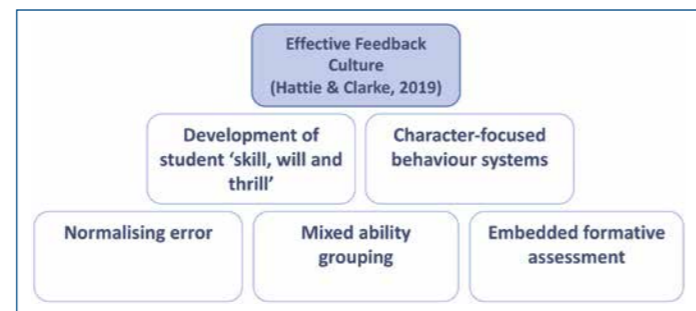
Feedback is manageable and motivating

Sweller's cognitive load theory (1988, 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 lots to focus on even in well-designed lessons. If we add several "things to do better" into a lesson and then after the lesson provide several more improvement points, this will overwhelm students. It will also be wasted effort 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 using 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 zone out completely and not respond to feedback at all.

Therefore, feedback must be manageable. Look closely at the big picture curriculum goals. Look



Famous five: Five of Hattie and Clarke's seven principles of effective feedback cultures (Hattie & Clarke, 2019)

can develop the skills students have to be able to respond to our feedback, which means they need to understand the policies we adhere to, and they need to have the right dispositions (the skill) and attitudes to be motivated (the will and thrill) to respond well. 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 simpler the better. This should be developed over an extended period of time with lots of feedback gained from staff about how it is going and what can be developed further. Simple codes can be exchanged for comments and highlighters can be exchanged for stickers or ticks. Monitoring shouldn't focus on compliance, rather on the impact feedback is having on learning over time. This is why it is helpful to include students in discussions about feedback as they will be the most able to articulate how feedback is helping them to grow and develop.

2, Character-focused behaviour systems

Any policy we have about behaviour must be aimed at developing the character of students, not simply compliance. The character they develop needs to enable them to be excellent learners. That's why feedback policies can be supported by behaviour policies. If we are explicitly teaching the skills, dispositions and attitudes needed for students to be able to respond to feedback, linking it to core character traits of good learners, then we will be further enforcing a core life skill – responding appropriately to feedback and acting upon it.

School leaders: Review behaviour policies with feedback in mind. Do they promote the character traits you want to see in learners? Do they enable students to know what the right attitudes are so that they can grow into excellent learners?

3, Normalising error

Making mistakes normal is crucial to feedback being given and acted upon. If anything, our 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 not 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: Assemblies and ethos moments 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 praising effort also supports this development.

4, Mixed ability seating

From my own personal experiences leading teaching, the best seating arrangements, 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. By sitting a low attaining student with a more able student, we empower the more able student to develop their learning by supporting someone else and, in turn, the low attaining student has an additional scaffold to help them when they need it. Of course, we have to develop the skill, will and thrill to be able to respond to this feedback effectively, but over time this creates an extra layer of depth to feedback practice.

School leaders: Offer CPD on why mixed ability seating matters and then encourage teachers to adopt this in their seating plans. This should be monitored with support offered if teachers struggle.

Teachers: Plan so that students are able to work in pairs and small groups to improve their work. If learning objectives and success criteria are well-designed and used across the curriculum, this opens up what success look like to students and they can assess their own work with teacher guidance.

5, Formative assessment

Formative assessment refers to a range of methods that teachers use to evaluate student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Here are three ways to integrate formative assessment into curriculum planning.

- Look at the task design of lessons and consider where they adequately enable students to demonstrate their learning, how they align with learning objectives and success

criteria, and whether they are the best use of lesson time. Well-designed tasks facilitate later in-lesson feedback

- Simple quizzing, either on paper or digitally, provides teachers with clarity about what students can and cannot remember. This can be used to make sense of the best next steps.

- More nuanced than quizzing, multiple choice questions that draw-out misconceptions can be powerful in ensuring that teachers are able to gather as much information as possible about student learning. I have found these to be particularly effective in maths or grammar-focused English lessons.

School leaders: Ensure you design CPD so that teachers are well-equipped to understand what makes great embedded formative assessment. Give time and space for teachers to work collaboratively on curriculum plans.

Teachers: Ensure you are designing curriculum and lessons more specifically with feedback in mind. Are tasks designed in a way that enables you to give high-quality feedback? If not, they ought to be changed or improved.

Core feedback strategies: The Feedback Cluster

So far, we have established a model (the feedback loop) and unpicked effective feedback school culture (the five essentials) to ensure the conditions are right for feedback to thrive. ➤



Now I will outline the core strategies – what we call 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 our teachers will use to further develop the quality of feedback in their classrooms, but these core elements are the essence of “how we do” feedback – the aspects of our teaching practice that happen in every classroom pretty much every day.

Each one of these strategies still needs to be skilfully deployed by the teacher, which is why we differentiate between two types of feedback:

- **Feedback within a lesson:** This is the feedback teachers provide on learning that goes on during the lesson. This can be given during guided or independent practice, it can be given in response to what is said by students in class discussion, or after responses to formative assessment tasks. This is the most powerful form of feedback as it happens as close to the learning episode as possible.
- **Feedback between lessons:** Typically referred to as marking, this is feedback that is developed, planned and given by the teacher when there are no students around. It is done by looking through students’ books, reflecting on the learning that has taken place, and considering how the following lesson will be developed in light of this information.

Feedback within and between lessons can be seen as sitting on a “continuum”. Teachers need to make good decisions about what

form feedback should take and when they should give it. The more feedback we can give within the lesson the better, but this is not always possible and there are times when feedback is actually best delayed, but it should never be too many days after the learning episode.

The following three strategies are taken from *Teaching WalkThrus* 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

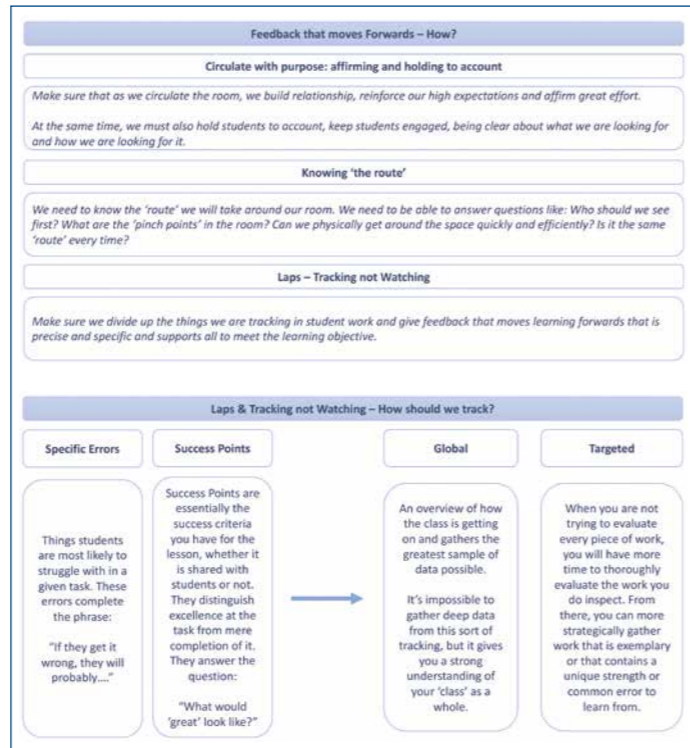
What is it? Teachers give feedback to the entire class about one or a few well-selected aspects of learning.

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 how and what 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 the following lesson. This happens at key moments throughout a unit of work, but not always every day.

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: when teachers tell students where they are in their learning and where they need to go next – turning it 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 important element is being responsive to student need. It is important that the feedback is matched to the student, but if tasks are designed well, if there is lots of formative assessment embedded into lessons, and if teachers have set a culture in their classrooms that normalises 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 difference 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

Best foot forwards: An outline of how we can use feedback that moves forwards and feedback as actions, including how we can make feedback ‘laps’ of our classrooms and track our students

lesson time. Whereas feedback that moves learning forwards is aimed at the type of feedback that is given, drawing on Hattie and Timperley’s model (2007), feedback as actions focuses on individual elements of the success criteria or learning objective. We call these “laps”.

How does it work? When is it used? When learning objectives and success criteria are in place during lesson time, teachers are able to stagger the feedback they give and scan the room in a way that ensures they give precise feedback in the right way and at the right time.

It is often delivered as actions in small steps rather than simply commenting on what has already taken place: “Your commas are correctly used in this list here Theo, now make sure you use them correctly to punctuate parenthesis.”

Teachers may do a “lap” of the classroom focusing solely on underlined dates, titles and basic punctuation. In their second lap, they might be looking for sentences with adjectives

punctuated with a comma. Their third lap might be a third element of the success criteria, such as punctuation for speech when a character is talking.

When teachers notice work that has been done well they can give precise praise and then consider a next step for this student in the moment. This is far more effective than waiting until the end of the lesson to provide this in written form.

In addition, it enables teachers to be responsive in the moment during lesson time. If they notice a common mistake or misconception across the class, they can stop, reteach or give reminders.

Leading feedback development

Implementation, development, monitoring: So how has this been led? What is the impact to date? In this final section I briefly reflect on these questions.

First, in terms of leadership, this has taken more than a year of development. When I joined the school, there was a culture of heavy written marking with minimal impact. Staff reported that workload was high and they were unsure about the benefit that much of their feedback had on student learning.

Yet, they had spent lots of time developing huge amounts of strategies that were poorly implemented. If I was to break down the leadership decisions made, it could be divided into four areas.

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 know why this sort of change is needed and what it is that will improve outcomes for students.

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

The more time teachers spend looking at research and considering how it is either compatible or different to their own practice the better. This means that any later development is rooted in a deeper common 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 to pre-empt how and when they will give this feedback. The more collaboratively this can be done the better.

Again, leaders ought to map this into their calendar and consider ways they can keep colleagues accountable for their planning.

3, Systematically practise core strategies

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

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It is also equally helpful to give staff time to plan their feedback that moves forwards and feedback as actions for the coming lessons.

This aspect of planning isn’t always seen in documents, but it can be very helpful for staff to have the space and time to consider what they will do, moment by moment, in a lesson to ensure they can support students to know where they are where they will go 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 have already thought-through how they will respond to information they have gathered from students, they are 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. The way I did this was through learning walks, book scrutiny and pupil voice at regular intervals. Quite often this drew-out great practice going on across the school that could be shared. At other times it enabled leaders to provide one-to-one support for feedback practice where things could be improved.

What next?
An area we have noted we need to improve on this academic year is student understanding of feedback: the skill, the will and 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 knowledge of what makes a great learner in this area. But that I shall leave for another time!

| Strategy | What is it? | How do we use it? |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Whole-Class Feedback | To move learning forward at key moments within a wider unit of work, give whole-class feedback on specific areas that lead to direct actions for students to respond to in their work using a green pen. | 1. Read student work 2. Note strengths 3. Note improvements 4. Give feedback (including models of good work) 5. Allow time to respond |
| Feedback as Actions | To move learning forward, use feedback as actions so that students can improve their work instantly and with teacher guidance. | According to the curriculum goals, learning objectives and success criteria for the lesson, choose one of the following: 1. Redraft or Re-do 2. Rehearse or Repeat 3. Revisit and Respond 4. Re-learn material and re-test 5. Research and record |
| Feedback that moves forwards | To move learning forward, use feedback that moves forward so that students can know where they are currently, where they need to go next and how they can do this in real-time during a lesson. | ‘Laps not chats, tracking not watching’ 1. Focus forwards 2. Positive and specific 3. Match message to student 4. Avoid SatNav syndrome 5. Reduce feedback over time |

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