

Academic Leadership: The Online Journal

Volume 4
Issue 4 Fall 2006

Article 7

10-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Dale, Kathy (2006) "Providing Students with Effective Feedback," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol4/iss4/7>

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Providing Students with Effective Feedback

Article

Feedback is a classroom process that has been under the researchers' microscopes since the 1970's to the present, and with good cause—it's a teacher practice that works. Consistently, researchers have found that when teachers effectively employ feedback procedures, they positively and often powerfully impact the achievement of their students. In fact, Bellon, Bellon, and Blank note, "Academic feedback is more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behavior... This relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting... When feedback and corrective procedures are used, most students can attain the same level of achievement as the top 20% of students."

So, if effective feedback is so powerful, what exactly are its components? Research has shown that effective feedback is not a discrete practice, but an integral part of an instructional dialogue between teacher and student, (or between students, or between the student and him/herself). Black and William cite three essential elements of what they term enhanced feedback:

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

Recognition of the desired goal. Since feedback is given in response to student performance, and student performance is an attempt to show mastery of a learning goal, clarity of the learning goal is where the feedback package begins. Teachers must be clear about their content area, curricular indicators, and mastery objectives. They need to clearly communicate the desired learning goal to students through instruction.

One extremely effective method for ensuring that students understand learning goals is to engage them in defining what successful achievement of the goals looks or sounds like. Teachers can provide several samples of products that achieve the learning goal in exemplary

fashion—sentences with correct capitalization, conclusions drawn from data, analyses of cause and effect, line graphs—and then lead students in an analysis of the criteria that all the samples have in common. Once students have derived these “criteria for success,” they are better able to incorporate them into their own work.

In addition to leading students to a clear understanding of the learning goal, teachers need to provide students with opportunities to indicate their levels of mastery of that goal. Only when students have “performed”—orally, in writing, or in another form—is when what we normally consider feedback enters the scene.

Evidence about present position. The use of the word “evidence” conveys one of the most vital aspects of effective feedback: it is information about how the performance relates to the learning goal—specifically, how that goal has been met and how it has not been met. As Grant Wiggins states, “Feedback is not about praise or blame, approval or disapproval. That’s what evaluation is—placing value. Feedback is value-neutral. It describes what you did and did not do.” In addition to being objective and descriptive, effective feedback is timely, delivered while the learning goal is still fresh in the learner’s mind.

One meaningful way to provide feedback is to compare the student product to the criteria for success that students helped derive or that the teacher had communicated to them. This feedback could simply be in the form of a list of the criteria for success which can be attached to the student product, with a + sign denoting the criteria that have been met and a highlighting of the criteria not yet met.

Understanding of a way to close the gap between the two. The third component of effective feedback is that it must “give each pupil guidance on how to improve, and each pupil must be given help and an opportunity to work on the improvement.” [Black and William] Not only must feedback provide a mirror to the student in terms of how his/her performance relates to the learning goal, it must also provide strategies and tips on how to achieve that goal, as well as the opportunity to apply the feedback. Shirley Clarke calls these tips “closing the gap” prompts; she suggests these prompts can take several forms, including reminders, suggestions, and questions. One example might be to suggest that the student revisit examples or models generated together in class; another might be to provide new samples

that exemplify the missing trait.

Wiggins agrees that it is only through this cycle of feedback that excellence results: "Students must have routine access to the criteria and standards for the task they need to master; they must have feedback in their attempts to master those tasks; and they must have opportunities to use the feedback to revise work and resubmit it for evaluation against the standard. Excellence is attained by such cycles of model-practice-perform-feedback-perform."

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VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]