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Feedback as a Connector in Remote Learning Environments

by Heather Rottermond and Laura Gabrion



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Abstract

In March, Michigan educators unexpectedly found themselves rethinking instruction. As schools throughout the state were shuttered due to the COVID-19 health crisis, educators at every level needed to consider ways to sustain relationships with students in an effort to move learning forward. Feedback has always served as a natural connector between teachers and their students, but students' use of feedback is based upon trust. This article examines the importance of formative assessment and the feedback cycle while exploring ways to deliver feedback in remote settings. By prioritizing the student-teacher relationship, teachers foster students' active engagement with feedback, thereby raising students' confidence, persistence, and performance.

Feedback as a Connector in Remote Learning Environments

The abrupt school closure in March 2020 due to COVID-19 left Michigan educators unsure of what the remaining school year would entail. In the weeks following the Governor's decision and the subsequent passing of the Continuity of Learning Executive Order 2020-35, resources, webinars, and emails with exhaustive lists of hyperlinks began to overwhelmingly fill the inboxes of district leaders, administrators, and teachers.

Having never experienced teaching in a virtual environment, many educators were left scrambling to figure out how to continue to instruct students while working from their homes. Students and teachers were further isolated as they were unfamiliar with digital platforms and tools to use during the instructional process.

Teachers have always known that cultivating relationships can positively impact student outcomes; in fact, a Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short- and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. (Sparks, 2019)

Yet, because of school closures, teachers have had to learn how to recreate the connections they fostered in the face-to-face environment in a new digital space. One natural way to promote the relationship between teacher and student is via feedback. When integrated into the formative assessment process, dialogic feedback, whether delivered synchronously or asynchronously, can provide students with opportunities for individual growth, including the development of skills and self-efficacy.

The Importance of the Formative Assessment Process

Whether engaging in face-to-face or virtual instruction, teachers should utilize the formative assessment process as a guide for planning, monitoring, adjusting, and responding to student learning.

Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners. (FAST SCASS, 2018)

Because formative assessment is student-centered (Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, & Arter, 2012), research has found that formative assessment positively impacts student success (Black & William, 1998; Sadler, 1989) and supports students in pinpointing challenges in their learning (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Formative assessment should not be viewed as a “one time” event, rather as an intentionally planned, ongoing process (see Figure 1). The power of the formative assessment process is that it encourages students to be self-directed as they use and consume information about their own learning, often in the form of feedback.

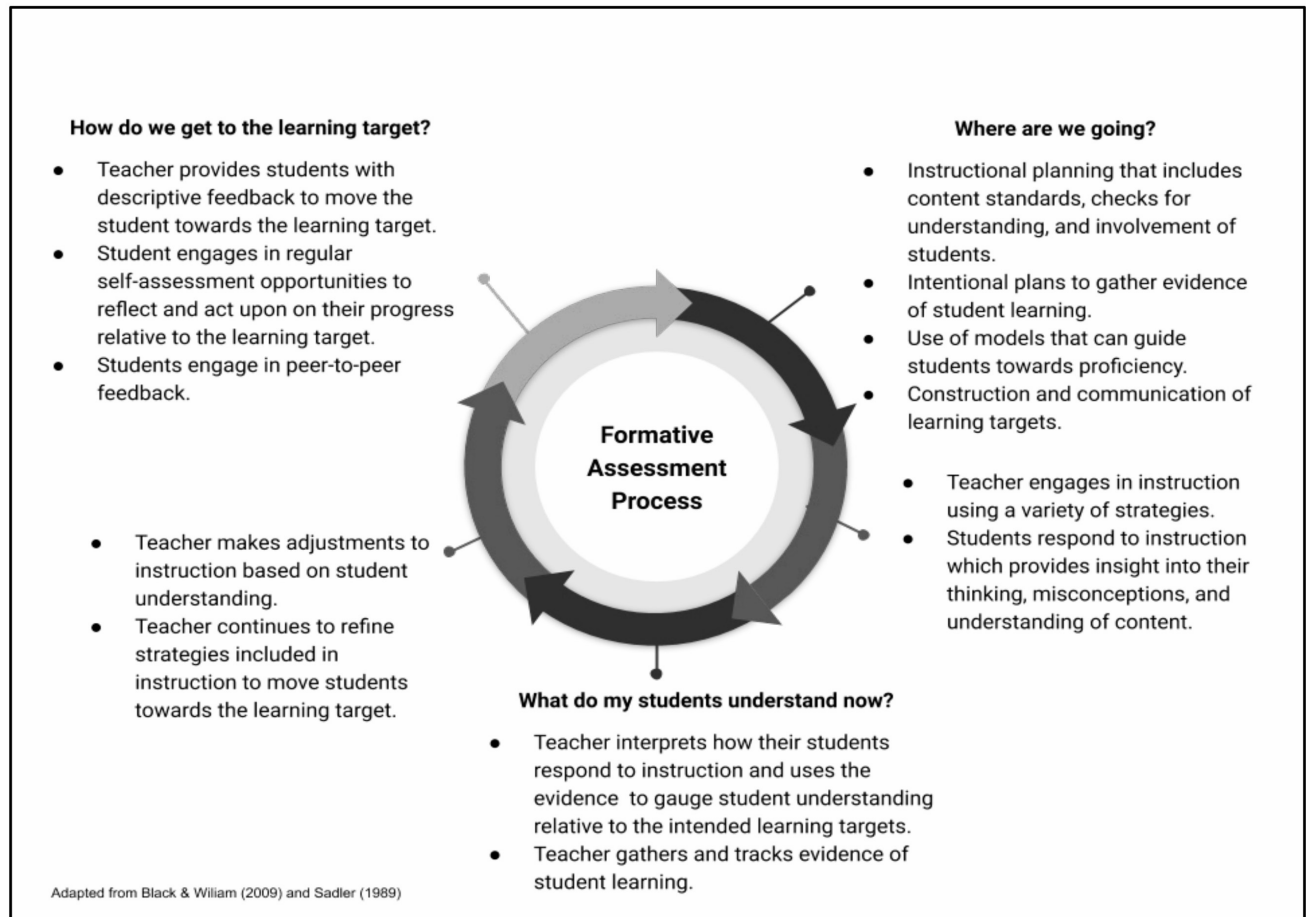


Figure 1. The Formative Assessment Process

While the formative assessment process enables teachers to move students toward identified learning goals, feedback builds and maintains interconnectedness between students and teachers in face-to-face or virtual settings. Furthermore, when done effectively and consistently, feedback is a powerful practice that has one of the highest impacts on student achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), regardless of whether that feedback is teacher-led, peer-led, or self-led.

Building Students' Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is one's "personal confidence in the ability to successfully perform tasks at a given level" (Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989). One approach to increasing students' self-efficacy is through dialogic feedback which encourages conversations between students and teachers about students' work; these conversations can appeal to the four "sources of information" (Bandura, 1977) that influence self-efficacy: mastery, modeling, encouragement, and climate. Ultimately, dialogic feedback diminishes students' misinterpretations of teachers' comments and gives students a better understanding of their work and which skills to address as they progress. Once self-efficacy has been initiated, it is important to give students autonomous activities, such as revision of their work, that will further build their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). As indicated below, feedback specificity is best in the initial stages. Students need time and opportunity to engage in productive struggles, as mastery of tasks sustains self-efficacy. It is important to note that building students' self-efficacy is not simply about instilling confidence; greater self-efficacy contributes to behaviors that rely more consistently upon engagement, persistence and diligence (Pajares, 2003). Thus, feedback can be an avenue through which students build a strong self-belief system by connecting with their teacher and peers.

What Is Feedback?

Feedback is information that helps students progress toward reaching a learning goal or outcome. To be most impactful, feedback must be actionable and specific, but it must also be delivered in a timeframe where students can reasonably act upon the comments

or suggestions and apply feedback to their learning. Teachers should consider the amount of feedback they provide to their students. Brookhart (2008) suggests using the "Goldilocks Principle," giving students a "just right" amount of feedback to ensure they can process, make improvements, and move closer to the intended learning outcome.

While the goal of feedback is to provide students with actionable steps, it is important to continue to increase students' self-efficacy by acknowledging aspects of their work that positively align with learning targets. The desire is for students to move toward proficiency, while building their own strategies for addressing opportunities for growth in their work.

Using Digital Tools to Provide Feedback

Teachers may have relied upon conferencing or written comments in their pre-closure classrooms; however, remote learning has challenged them to consider innovative ways to give feedback to their students. In asynchronous settings, word processing programs offer teachers several options for providing feedback. For example, in both Google and Word documents, teachers can use the comments feature to ask questions, make suggestions, or give praise. Feedback stems, like those listed below, can be saved in a separate document for easy access or can be added to the comment bank in a learning management system, such as Google Classroom. To accommodate different types of learners, teachers can also supply students with audio or video feedback. Applications like Vocaroo make it convenient for teachers to record and share comments. In addition, Screencastify, Screencast-O-Matic and other screencasting programs allow teachers to record, thereby delivering spatially ordered and specific comments. Both audio comments and screencasts permit teachers to personalize their statements (Fiock & Garcia, 2019), and because they can be hyperlinked to students' work, students have the option to replay the comments.

In synchronous settings, one-on-one or group conferences can be scheduled through video conferencing

platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. Students have immediate access to their teachers and can ask questions and/or work through revisions on the spot. Such sessions can be recorded, which offers students an extra layer of support. Similar to audio or screencast feedback, if recorded, students can continue to access the comments as needed.

Because learning is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1986), it is important for teachers to facilitate peer-to-peer feedback opportunities. In a traditional classroom setting, teachers often provide explicit instructions for peer-to-peer feedback; this practice may be even more important in remote settings where students will need additional help navigating digital applications. Modeling or developing virtual norms and guidelines will assist students when using tools like Flipgrid, a platform that allows students to post short video responses about classmates' work. Students can also use the comments feature in Google or Word documents to type or link recorded suggestions, and through video conferencing, students have the ability to meet one-on-one or in small groups to workshop their current projects.

The main objective of teacher and/or peer feedback is for students to act upon it as they revise their work. In remote learning environments, students can create checklists in Google Keep, or they can use the Tasks feature in Google documents to itemize their proposed revisions. Both options allow students to check off completed changes, such as adding details, testing organization, or removing unnecessary information. In addition, students can evaluate the feedback provided by both teacher and peers and decide whether to use it in their revision plan. Revision plans can be organized according to areas of need and benefits, while allowing students to engage in reflection around how and why the changes are made. Finally, students can use a variety of digital tools to ask clarifying questions of both teacher and peers, such as email, the comments feature, screencasts, Flipgrid, Vocaroo, and video conferencing. This list [<https://tinyurl.com/toolsforfeedback>], while not comprehensive, provides teachers with a great starting point.

Formative Assessment through Teacher-Led, Peer-Led, and Student-Led Feedback

As previously stated, Hattie “suggests that feedback can be one of the most effective instructional strategies for improving student performance and closing achievement gaps” (as cited in Hattie, Fisher, & Frey, 2016). Like the formative assessment process, feedback is cyclical and recursive (see Figure 2). A key component of effective feedback, however, is how students interpret and apply it to their work. Often students are given feedback and are unsure of what to do with it. Such students become frustrated, make safe changes, and begin to question their abilities to improve. Therefore, by building a culture of trust and engaging students in the feedback process, teachers help students “develop an awareness of their learning, [...] recognize mistakes and eventually develop strategies for tackling weak points themselves” (Stenger, 2014).

Ongoing Teacher-Led Feedback

Teacher feedback and student response should be viewed as a cycle in which students actively participate because feedback is most beneficial to students when they understand it. Thus, building the student-teacher relationship is of utmost importance and might determine whether students are willing to act upon the feedback they receive. Beginning with student strengths sets a tone; it reinforces the teacher's belief in the student's ability to reach the learning goal. Teacher-provided feedback should be centered around the questions of

- “Where am I going?”
- “How am I going?”
- “Where will I go next?” (Hattie & Tipperly, 2007)

Using catch-all phrases like “Good job!” and “Nice work!” or providing a summative grade/score without specific feedback can create a roadblock. The summative grade could be interpreted by the student as final, meaning there is nothing left to improve as the grade has become the stopping point in the learning. Additionally, generic comments and evaluative scores do not provide a pathway for students to improve their learning; they fail to answer the question “Where will

I go next?” Instead, research suggests being specific, especially when providing initial feedback to students (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004), while avoiding evaluative or judgmental comments which can impact student motivation (Butler & Nisan, 1986).

Suggestions for specific and actionable comments are listed below:

- *Your choice in _____ is strong because _____.*
- *When you said/wrote “ _____,” it strengthened your argument/thinking because _____.*
- *This argument might not convince a reader. What else might you add to make your argument stronger?*
- *I noticed you _____, and this would look/sound more polished if you were to _____ because _____.*
- *I noticed you _____, and I think you are on the right track. Might you consider adding/changing/omitting _____?*

Incorporating Peer Feedback

While students benefit from regular teacher feedback, the teacher does not have to be the sole provider of feedback during the learning process. According to Pintrich and Zusho, students can reap the benefits of feedback from their peers, which in turn can have a positive impact on self-regulation as it relates to learning, motivation, and behavior (as cited in Feldman, 2018).

There are several key advantages to engaging in regular peer feedback. Notably, when many students are learning virtually and may be experiencing isolation, the practice of peer feedback can provide needed social interaction that can aid in learning (Chappuis, 2015). Other advantages have been noted in the research by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), who found that students can sometimes explain things better to their peers because it is delivered in language they understand (as cited in Feldman, 2018). Often, students can provide insight and strategies for overcoming roadblocks or challenges because they are engaged in the same task (Chappuis, 2015). Additionally, when students engage in this process, they are deepening their

own understanding of quality as they craft and deliver descriptive feedback to a peer; their peers can be more receptive to the feedback because they are not viewed in an evaluative role that would deliver a grade or judgment, like a teacher might (Chappuis, 2015). This shift in practice can empower students to self-direct, take ownership of their learning, and build their self-efficacy.

When using peers as a modality for feedback, this process, like building trust and relationships, must be cultivated, modeled, and regularly practiced; effective peer feedback does not happen overnight. When making this practice part of the classroom routine, teachers must be mindful that the benefits of peer feedback come when it is regular and ongoing. Even in a virtual setting, teachers can cultivate peer feedback by creating a safe classroom community that prioritizes relationships and trust. This can be accomplished through team-building activities, sharing opportunities, and time to connect with peers outside of the core content. When engaging in the peer feedback process, teachers will need to ensure the learning intentions and success criteria are clear to students as they craft descriptive feedback; for example, teachers can provide students with rubrics or checklists. Students can then apply the success criteria to a piece of work in a low-stakes environment using previous students’ work as a model. This takes away the fear of being evaluated so students can focus on the process and practice of giving and receiving quality feedback. Teachers should leverage peer feedback as another layer of support to not only build students’ ability to work collaboratively, but independently.

Self-Led Feedback and Revision

Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory promotes relationships as essential, specifically associations that foster collaboration. In fact, socialization, according to Vygotsky, must occur before internalization (1934/1986). Therefore, self-led feedback and revision rely upon dialogue that engages students in a conversation about their work. Regardless of the medium, feedback comments that stimulate students’ engagement can provide them with opportunities for individual growth.

Once students have received feedback, they need to plan their next steps. In addition to teacher-created feedback forms, curricular resources often include rubrics and checklists, but students can also create these tools based upon an assignment’s learning targets. In addition, students can devise revision plans that articulate the changes they intend to make. Such plans allow students an opportunity to reflect upon the suggestions

they have received from their teacher and peers. As students move from teacher-centered to student-centered actions, they learn to make deliberate choices, persist when assignments become difficult, and maintain low levels of stress. Teachers have the power to positively affect students’ self-efficacy through teacher-led and peer-led feedback that is supplemented by students’ revision goals.

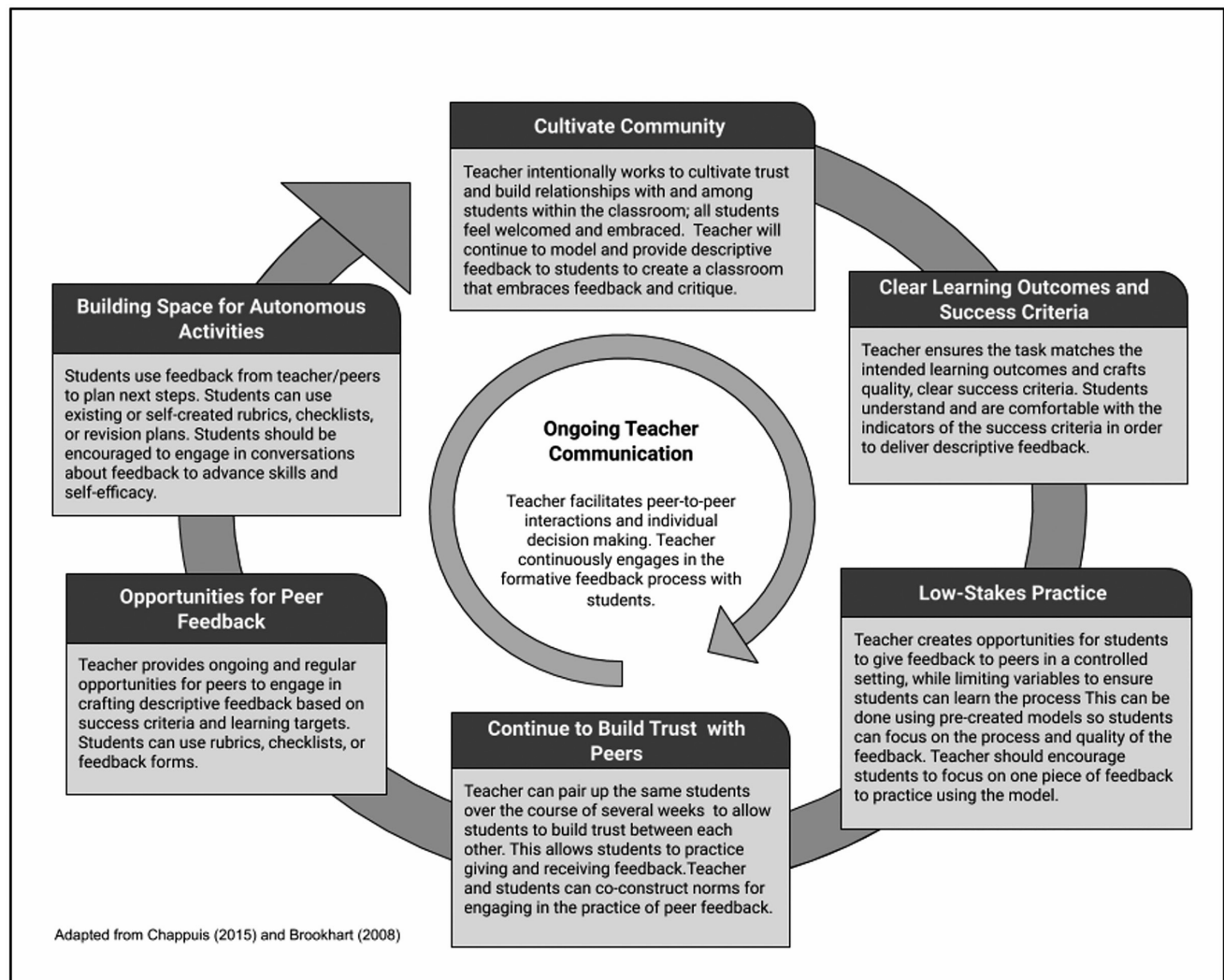


Figure 2. Integrated and Ongoing Feedback Cycle

Looking Ahead

As we move steadily toward the middle of the 2020-2021 school year, the course of instructional delivery remains unclear. While most teachers and students prefer traditional learning environments, the current health crisis continues to present an obstacle. Therefore, because it is known that the teacher-student relationship is crucial to student success, it is important that teachers continue to build trust by including methods of communication that engage students in the formative assessment process. In providing multiple opportunities to understand, prioritize and use formative feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Martin, 2011), teachers help students move toward intended learning goals. Thus, whether furnished asynchronously or synchronously, feedback invites students and teachers to create a connection.

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