



## Preventing Feedback Fizzle

*Susan M. Brookhart*

**There's more to feedback than just crafting thoughtful comments. Here's how to avoid common pitfalls and make the most of feedback.**

Feedback is certainly about saying or writing helpful, learning-focused comments. But that's only part of it. What happens beforehand? What happens afterward?

Feedback that's helpful and learning-focused fits into a context. Before a teacher gives feedback, students need to know the learning target so they have a purpose for using the feedback they receive. Say you're trying to teach students how to identify the main idea in expository text. If a student isn't trying to *learn* how to do this with the text he or she is working on, your feedback about emphasizing a certain point (such as, "Tell us more about the Articles of Confederation") will seem like something you want the student to do to comply with your wishes, instead of something the student needs to learn (such as why the Articles of Confederation are so important to the main idea of the text).

But there's another essential component to effective feedback. After receiving feedback, students need the opportunity to digest, understand, and use it.

### It Starts with a Target

Before feedback occurs, students need to know what they're trying to learn. Learning targets are student-friendly descriptions—through words, pictures, actions, or some combination of these—of what you intend students to learn or accomplish in a lesson. They're connected to a performance of understanding—something the student actually does to pursue the target—as well as to accompanying criteria for good work that students use to gauge their progress toward the goal. Learning targets are not instructional objectives, which teachers use for instructional planning and which can span one or more lessons.

For example, suppose a teacher's goal is, "Students will recognize and draw shapes having specified attributes, such as a given number of angles or a given number of equal faces" (part of Common Core Mathematics Standard 2.G.1). Students will work on this goal for a whole unit. There will be lessons (and objectives in teacher language) about identifying angles, faces, and other attributes of various figures; lessons about congruence; lessons about solving problems; and so on.

One day, students are learning that congruent figures have exactly the same attributes. Here's how the teacher might state the learning target: "I can draw a figure that's exactly the same size and shape as an example." (Notice that the learning target is expressed from the student's—and not the teacher's—point of view.) The teacher shows students their learning target using correct and incorrect examples of congruent figures. Then she engages students in a performance of understanding. Using grid paper, students are to exactly reproduce two irregular polygons and receive feedback from a partner about whether their figures are the same as the examples. Then each student must create an original irregular polygon on grid paper for his or her partner to replicate. Students turn in their final work with explanations for why their figures are exactly the same as the examples provided.

Notice that the teacher *told* the students what the learning target was (using the I-can statement) and *showed* the students what the learning target was (using the correct and incorrect examples). Then the students had the opportunity to *show themselves* what the learning target was and how they were doing (the performance of understanding, the grid paper exercise). The criterion, in this case, was built in (Are the two figures exactly the same?).

If students do an assignment simply because you asked them to, that's compliance. Compliance is reactive, not proactive. Of course, students should do what you ask, but they won't learn much unless they understand why you're asking. When you say, "You can show how well you understand what a food chain is by drawing one and then solving some what-if problems related to it. Here's an example," students aren't just complying, but also learning about food chains and producing evidence of what they're learning.

Feedback can't work if students aren't trying to reach a learning target—or don't know what the target is, or don't care. In that instance, information is an answer to a question students aren't asking. Feedback without a learning target is just somebody telling you what to do.

## When Feedback Fizzles

When the learning target and the performance of understanding don't match exactly and the criteria aren't clear, students often experience feedback as evaluation or grading rather than information for improvement, as in the following example.

A middle school mathematics teacher was teaching his pre-algebra students how to solve one-step equations with one variable. The concept he wanted them to learn was that using inverse operations will isolate a variable on one side of the equation and lead to an efficient solution. The class did several examples together, and then the teacher had the students do a problem set individually. The directions on the problem set read, "Solve. Show all steps." There was no mention of inverse operations except as implied in the term *steps*. In an effort to keep calculations easy, many of the problems could be solved with mental arithmetic.

One of the problems read  $m + 8 = 15$ . Quickly calculating this in her head, one student wrote  $m = 7$ . The teacher marked the problem wrong. The student's first reaction to this feedback was, "That's not wrong!"

The fact is, they were looking for different things. The teacher was looking for evidence of the use of inverse operations; he wanted the student to understand how subtracting 8 from both sides of the equation would solve the problem—and he wanted the student to show this work. The student was looking for an efficient solution to the problem, which she achieved. The teacher's feedback wasn't descriptive; it was an evaluation.

It's not that the teacher's objective was wrong. My point is that the teacher didn't communicate the objective as a learning target the student should aim for, and the result was ineffective feedback. The student got angry instead of looking to learn more.

## When Feedback Sparkles

When the learning target and the performance of understanding match exactly and the criteria are clear to both students and teacher, teachers can give feedback that students understand and use right away, as in this example.

Erica Smith teaches a Title I, extended-day kindergarten class. Her learning target for students for one day's lesson was this: "I can recognize whether there's a short *ă* sound in the middle of a word." For this lesson, the teacher described and modeled the criteria for students, saying, "We'll know that the word has the *ă* sound in the middle if our mouth is open wide and our tongue is flat when we say the middle sound." She modeled the strategy of "stretching" the word with her hands (fl – a – t) to more clearly emphasize the middle sound.

The performance of understanding was for students to stretch words and decide whether there was an *ă* sound in the middle. They began by pronouncing some words as a group and shaking heads (yes/no) to identify whether the middle sound was *ă*. Then students did this several times individually, with Erica giving oral feedback. The final product was completing a written assignment that had five picture words for students to indicate whether there was an *ă* sound in the middle.

One student, Marisa, made a mistake with the word *flag*; she said there was no *ă* sound in the middle. Erica's feedback began with the question, "Tell me the picture name." Marisa responded "flag," showing Erica that the source of error wasn't that Marisa didn't know the picture name. Next, Erica asked Marisa to stretch the word *flag*. When Marisa did, she realized it *did* have an *ă* sound in the middle. When Erica asked, "How do you know?" Marisa modeled an open mouth and a flat tongue, showing she used the criteria herself. Using a series of questions to delve into a child's understanding—what Clarke calls "scaffolded prompts"<sup>1</sup>—is an effective way to extend students' learning.

## It Finishes with Use

Feedback can't be left hanging; it can't work if students don't have an immediate opportunity to use it. In my experience, teachers are better at giving immediate feedback than at setting up opportunities for students to use it.

One exception to this is teachers who use the writing process. These teachers already know the "immediate opportunity to use" principle. Students regularly incorporate first-draft feedback into revisions for their final copies.

This approach works in a wide variety of situations, however, not just in writing class. Whether students are writing reports or doing projects, the teacher should give them feedback on drafts and partial products so they can incorporate the feedback into their final products, revise them, and then reflect on how the changes improved their work.

## When Feedback Fizzles

When students get feedback on a performance that's *not* followed by an opportunity to demonstrate the same knowledge or skills, feedback will fail. Feedback "so they know better next time" is a waste of energy. This isn't the students' fault, and it doesn't mean they didn't take your feedback seriously. It's just a characteristic of how people learn.<sup>2</sup>

For example, a middle school reading and language arts teacher wanted her students to learn how to summarize nonfiction text (her instructional objective). She told her students that "summarizing nonfiction text" was their learning

target, and she gave them a worksheet that divided a chapter in their social studies text into five sections (for example, "Summary of pages 321–324," "Summary of pages 325–337," and so on), with blank spaces under each for students to write their summary. She reminded the students that a summary restates the big ideas of the text, eliminating details. She told them they would know they had succeeded when they could write their own summaries of chapter sections, using those criteria (big ideas, no details), and get a minimum grade of 75 percent.

This example is a double fizzle: To begin with, the teacher never provided a clear, shared learning target and criteria. Then, to compound things, the feedback came as a grade at the end of the learning episode. Because summarizing textbook information is a basic skill, the teacher reasoned, the students would use the feedback they received in some as-yet-unspecified future textbook reading.

First, consider the learning target. "Summarizing nonfiction text" isn't a daily learning target; it's a major skill that develops over the course of a student's education. Moreover, the students were given no examples or models, just told that a summary contains the big ideas from a text. The learning target should probably have been something like this, expressed from the student's point of view: "I can summarize information on ecosystems from my textbook, and I'll know I can do it when I can put all the important ideas in one section of the textbook in a single paragraph."

Second, consider the performance of understanding, what the students were actually supposed to do to move toward their target and show evidence of having learned it. It was just a list of five page ranges, the supposition being that when students read text, they'll be able to capture main ideas.

Third, consider the criteria. Using big ideas and eliminating detail are descriptions of quality summaries of the sort the teacher envisioned, but "getting a minimum of 75 percent" is an evaluative criterion that is of no help to students as they're writing their summaries.

Finally, consider the summative or end-of-story nature of the feedback. This is what breaks my heart about this example. What the teacher actually wrote on her students' scored worksheets was very thoughtful, descriptive feedback, with suggestions for next steps. For example, on one set of summaries that she awarded a grade of 3 out of 4 she wrote, "I can see you made an effort to keep your summary brief, and that was a goal of this lesson. If you had told us how the Everglades was formed and then almost destroyed, this would have given you a 4." Just looking at this feedback, without knowing the rest of the story, you might judge it effective.

But there was no next step. The assignment was done, the students were finished, and the feedback was moot. If the teacher had given the same feedback as an intermediate step, before the final set of summaries was due, the student could have used it to revise the work *before* turning it in for grading. An alternative, and probably a better use of time, would have been for the teacher to ask students to write a summary of one of the five sections she listed and turn it in for feedback. Students could then have used her feedback to revise that one summary and, with this knowledge under their belts, write the additional four summaries.

## When Feedback Sparkles

Teachers set up feedback to be effective when the learning target and the performance of understanding match, when students have a clear idea of the criteria for their performance and get immediate feedback on that performance, and when they have an opportunity to perform this skill or activity again. Here's an example.

A 9th grade physical science teacher wanted her students to learn how varying conditions affect projectile motion. This was her objective. Her learning target for students was that they would be able to predict how projectiles would move. For a performance of understanding, she asked students to predict the effects of four projectile characteristics (the object's angle of launch, initial speed, mass, and diameter, both with and without air resistance) on three characteristics of the projectile's motion (how far it goes, how high it goes, and how long before it hits the ground—or, range, height, and time, respectively). In groups, students wrote a statement about how they predicted each of the four characteristics would affect the three aspects of motion and explained their reasoning.

The next learning target was that students would be able to assess the accuracy of their predictions and reasoning. The performance of understanding was a lab. Students used a web-based simulation in which they changed one input variable at a time and created a table to record their results. Then they compared the predicted and observed results for each input variable and wrote down whether the simulation results supported their initial reasoning or not. The criteria were accuracy of comparison and soundness of scientific reasoning.

Students used their prediction sheets and data tables to write lab reports, and they submitted rough drafts to the teacher. She gave feedback on the substance of the reports—that is, on students' observations and reasoning about how changing the characteristics of objects affected their projectile motion. Her feedback was *not* about lab report format or "correctness" of conclusions, but about the observations and reasoning. The feedback was not "giving away answers" but rather pushing students to learn more. For example, on one student's report she noted, "A larger diameter should have a shorter range, distance, and hang time than a smaller diameter when air resistance is present. How can you show this?" Students then had an opportunity to revise their lab reports before handing them in for a final grade.

## Avoid the Fizzle

To avoid feedback fizzle, take the following steps.

First, share the learning target and success criteria for each lesson with your students. Make sure your performance of understanding—what the students actually do during the lesson—is a spot-on match with your learning target. This accomplishes several good things. By sharing the learning target in the assignment itself—and not just in words—students can envision what they're supposed to learn by looking at what they're asked to do. As students do their work, they make progress toward the target. This work produces evidence on which teachers can base effective feedback, which students can use, in turn, to self-regulate their learning.

Second, whether your feedback is oral or written, choose your words carefully. Describe the work's strengths and give at least one suggestion for a next step that is directly in line with the learning target. Use words that suggest the student is an active learner and will make decisions about how to go forward, not words that suggest a student should use the feedback by complying with a request. For example, you might say, "What were you thinking as a writer when you described the tree?" and not, "Why did you write about the tree?"

Third, follow episodes of feedback with immediate opportunities for students to use their feedback, before you give them a grade. For writing and complex projects, students may use feedback for revisions and redos. However, for solving a mathematics problem, applying punctuation rules, balancing chemical equations, and other application-level tasks, revisions and redos are *not* appropriate because students have already seen the answers. They need to use feedback to tackle other similar problems. They don't necessarily have to do another whole page of work; sometimes another problem or two is enough to show themselves and you that they've been able to use the feedback and are ready to move on.

Put these feedback tips in place—and watch your students sparkle!

## Good Feedback Is ...

- *Timely*. It arrives while the student is still thinking about the work and while there's still time for improvement.
- *Descriptive of the work*, not the student personally. It focuses on one or more strengths of the work and provides at least one suggestion for a next step. Don't assume that your students know what they did well and that they only need corrections or fixes.
- *Positive*. It shows how learning is a journey forward, and it's honest about both strengths to build on and weaknesses to improve. Its tone conveys to the student that the teacher thinks of him or her as an active learner.
- *Clear and specific*. It's specific enough so the student knows what to do next, but it leaves the student with some thinking to do.
- *Differentiated*. It meets the needs of each student with respect to the current work. For some students, a reminder is all that's needed for a next step; others may need prompts or examples.

Source: [How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students](#), by S.M. Brookhart (2008). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, S. (2003). *Enriching feedback in the primary classroom*. London: Hodder Murray.

<sup>2</sup> Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance*. New York: Routledge.

[Susan M. Brookhart](#) is an independent education consultant based in Helena, Montana, and a research associate in the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning at Duquesne University. Her latest book, coauthored with Connie M. Moss, is [Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson](#) (ASCD, 2012).

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