BEST OF THE BEST
PRACTICAL CLASSROOM GUIDES

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FEEDBACK

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BEST OF THE BEST
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ISABELLA WALLACE AND LEAH KIRKMAN

FEEDBACK

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The term 'feedback' is a relative newcomer to the English lexicon. It was coined in the early 20th century during the development of broadcasting technology to describe the sort of disruptive noise you will almost certainly have heard at some time or another when your favourite guitar player has wandered too close to the amplifier. Later, it was adopted by communication theorists who gave it a much more positive spin, using it as the term for an incoming response to an outgoing message – a signal that tells us the communication has been received. Most familiar to us now in an educational context, its meaning has further evolved and diversified.

Feedback is often cited as one of the most powerful tools for enhancing learning. And in the classroom it can be understood and implemented in a whole range of ways, as our contributors – the best of the best – demonstrate in the following pages. But although they each provide their own unique take on the importance of feedback to teaching and learning, they are unanimous in emphasising the paramount importance of feedback as clear *communication* – the context in which our current understanding of the word originated.

Dylan Wiliam, for example, points out the importance of formative assessment as a means of enabling the teacher to make evidence-based decisions about each student's needs, and stresses the importance of this source of feedback as a way

of gaining insight into what students are getting out of the teaching process. Similarly, Mike Gershon, who makes the link to communication theory quite explicit with his diagram of the 'feedback loop', illustrates the point that feedback is not a one-off response but a continuing process or dialogue. However, for a student to respond effectively and constructively to the feedback they are given by the teacher, they must be allowed time in which to reflect on it and implement it. Their response is a continuation of the feedback loop – the two-way communication conducted over time. This same point about feedback being a two-way process is made by Andy Griffith, who also employs the language of communication theory when he argues that, for the teacher, feedback is something we should be able to both give and receive. He explores this idea in the light of the question: how can we encourage our students to be more open to feedback? The answer, he suggests, lies in the willingness of the teacher to model this openness themselves by inviting and acting on student feedback in order to improve the effectiveness of their own practice.

This idea of feedback from students to teachers – a reversal of our usual assumptions about the direction of flow – is also taken up by Mick Waters, who suggests formalising this process by inviting students to award points to teachers based on the teacher's effectiveness in helping the student to learn. Shirley Clarke, too, argues that it is feedback from learners to teachers which constitutes the most significant and productive means of improving students' learning experience and supporting their

learning. This application of feedback, as an important opportunity for learning and improvement for teachers as well as their students, is a point also made by Jackie Beere, whose contribution focuses on how best to encourage a positive response to feedback. She advocates introducing the idea of 'thinking on purpose' – the practice of reflecting on feedback in order to be able to act on it appropriately and productively. To this end, she points out the advantages – whether you are a teacher or a student – of reframing critical feedback as something positive rather than negative; as a valuable opportunity to learn and improve. Indeed, this emphasis on feedback as a trigger for action is one also shared by Andy Griffith, Mike Gershon and several others.

Other contributors give us a different perspective, focusing instead on what constitutes the most useful and effective feedback. For example, Art Costa and Robert Garmston challenge the notion that feedback should be about giving praise. Writing in the context of feedback on teacher performance, they argue that praise can actually be counterproductive, since it encourages dependency on the assessor rather than developing a capacity for reflection in the person being assessed. A more useful and productive form of feedback, they argue, is to use what they term 'data description' – describing what you see. Barry Hymer, in his contribution, makes the same point. Praise and reward can, he tells us, be detrimental to intrinsic motivation. If a student relies for motivation on praise from the teacher, they won't learn to motivate themselves and develop a love of

learning for its own sake. Their engagement with learning will always be dependent on the promise of a prize or external reward. Like Costa and Garmston, Hymer argues that simple praise and reward only serve to keep the teacher in control, and thereby rob the student of self-efficacy. Instead, teachers should aim to give acknowledgement, encouragement and feedback that is both detailed and specific, a point also made by Seth Godin, who suggests that feedback should offer an analysis rather than simply an opinion: 'This worked because ...' rather than, 'I liked this.' Godin makes the further point that timing is crucial to ensuring that the feedback you give will be effective in improving performance, because if it is given too early or too late the student (or indeed teacher) will not be in a position to act on it.

The argument for analytical and specific feedback is taken up by Ron Berger and Diana Laufenberg, who both argue for the importance of giving feedback referenced to clear criteria. Their practical approaches to this differ, however. Laufenberg places an emphasis on the importance of making time to give detailed, face-to-face feedback against the assessment criteria to each individual student. This face-to-face delivery, she argues, is both more effective and more encouraging than written feedback. Berger, on the other hand, lays no particular emphasis on giving feedback face to face, but argues for the importance of giving individual, descriptive feedback on specific aspects of student work or performance and of avoiding general, holistic statements such as 'good work'.

On the other hand, Phil Beadle argues that praise should be considered a very important element when giving feedback. Using the analogy of a coach encouraging a football team, he illustrates the way in which praise has the power to motivate in the immediate moment in a way that analytical criticism does not. However, praise should, he tells us, always be followed by advice on how to do even better. Geoff Petty, too, cites praise as one of the key factors for effective learning which has emerged from meta studies of evidence-based research, together with clearly understood goals and the will to improve. And Taylor Mali, writing in the context of giving feedback to parents on a child's performance and attainment, also makes a case for giving positive feedback, suggesting that negative feedback will be less likely to lead to improvement than if the teacher accentuates what is praiseworthy while highlighting the room for development within that positive context. Nevertheless, more important even than feedback, Mali argues, is what he refers to as 'feedfront' – giving clear instructions and setting clear goals before a task even begins. In this respect he is in agreement with Ron Berger, Diana Laufenberg and others who stress the need for feedback to be linked to clear, previously stated criteria.

Although several contributors warn against giving generalised and non-specific praise, this does not discount, of course, the need for a positive approach with an emphasis on demonstrating kindness, encouragement and helpfulness in the giving of feedback – whatever that feedback may be. Seth Godin, for example, reminds us to 'say something nice' if we can. Similarly,

Ron Berger tells us that we must be 'kind' when feeding back on work, whatever it is that must be said. And Art Costa and Robert Garmston, who take a strong position against feedback that is simply evaluative, stress at the same time the need to establish a sense of trust if the feedback we give is to be accepted as meaningful and constructive.

Some of the contributors provide advice about very specific approaches. Paul Dix, for example, gives a detailed account of the use of student wristbands on which they can record the useful feedback they have been given. This is a way of encouraging them to take ownership – literally – of their own progress and ongoing targets for learning. Bill Lucas, too, in arguing that we must give students the opportunity and choice to accept or reject the feedback advice that we offer them, is also raising the issue of students taking ownership, albeit in a less material sense. A further example of a contributor who gives us some insight into the practical implications of her approach is Diana Laufenberg, who explains how she makes time for one-to-one feedback by planning work that the rest of the class can absorb themselves in while she speaks to each individual.

From these contributions, each unique and enlightening in its own right, a number of key themes emerge. One of these is the need to get the balance right between praise and constructive critique by keeping feedback specific, detailed and firmly referenced to clearly explained criteria. Another is that these same principles should be applied whether the feedback is from

teacher to student, teacher to colleague, student to teacher or student to student. Response to feedback, too, emerges as a theme: the need to give students the time to reflect on it, to question it, to act on it. And, of course, we have a theme which relates to the manner in which feedback should be given: kindly, constructively, in a timely way and in an atmosphere of trust. Above all, perhaps, these contributors are united in the view that what effective feedback is primarily about is clear, constructive and specific communication.

In what follows, you will find the detail of what each expert has to say in their own distinctive voice. For each of these important insights, you will find a number of ways to practically implement the experts' ideas in your own classroom or even across your whole school. Some experts have provided their own strategies, and everything that is from the experts' own voices appears in white text on a black background. Looking for some ways to facilitate peer feedback without witnessing comments like, 'Your story is awesome' or 'Include more words'? Desperate to stop that sensitive student from taking personal offence every time you offer constructive feedback? Interested in rediscovering your social life by acquiring new ways to make written feedback less time consuming? Read on to see what some of the greatest names in education have to say about feedback and explore a host of practical strategies that will enable you to ensure that feedback – in *your* classroom – is truly the powerfully transformative tool it has the potential to be.

PROFESSOR DYLAN WILIAM is Emeritus Professor of Educational Assessment at University College London. After seven years of teaching in London schools, he joined Chelsea College, which later became part of King's College London. In a varied career, he has trained teachers, managed a large-scale testing programme and served a number of roles in university administration. He has written over 300 books, articles and chapters, many with his long-time colleague Paul Black. His most recent books are *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K-12 Classrooms* (with Siobhán Leahy, 2015) and *Leadership for Teacher Learning* (2016).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN TEACHING AND LEARNING

PROFESSOR DYLAN WILIAM

Formative assessment is at the heart of good teaching because of one principle about learning and one uncomfortable fact about the world. The principle is that *good teaching starts from where learners are, rather than where we would like them to be*. The uncomfortable fact about the world is that *students do not learn what we teach*. Put these two things together and the need for formative assessment is clear. We need to find out what our students have learned before we teach them anything else.

Of course, the fact that students know something today does not mean they will know it in six weeks' time – as Paul Kirschner reminds us, learning is a change in long-term memory (Kirschner et al., 2006). But if they don't know something today, it is highly unlikely they will know it in six weeks' time. Formative assessment is based on the simple idea that it is better to know what is going on in the heads of our students than not.

Some people argue that the term 'formative assessment' is unhelpful – this is, after all, just good teaching. But the use of the word 'assessment' draws attention to the quality of evidence the teacher has for the decisions that need to be taken. If you are only getting answers to your questions from confident students, you can't possibly make decisions that reflect the learning needs of the whole class. And, of course, once you find out what your students have learned, you need to provide

feedback to the students that helps them to move their learning forward, rather than just telling them what's wrong with their existing work. After all, the purpose of feedback is to improve the student, not the work they have just done.

And this means a fundamental shift in perspective, from looking at what the teacher is putting into the process to what the students are getting out of it. As one teacher said, it's all about making the students' voices louder and the teacher's hearing better.

FURTHER READING

Black, Paul, Harrison, Chris, Lee, Clara, Marshall, Bethan and Wiliam, Dylan (2003). *Assessment for Learning: Putting It Into Practice* (Buckingham: Open University Press).

Kirschner, Paul A., Sweller, John and Clark, Richard E. (2006). Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching, *Educational Psychologist* 41(2): 75–86.

Wiliam, Dylan (2011). *Embedded Formative Assessment* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree).

Wiliam, Dylan (2016). *Leadership for Teacher Learning: Creating a Culture Where All Teachers Improve So That All Learners Succeed* (West Palm Beach, FL: Learning Sciences International).

Wiliam, Dylan and Leahy, Siobhán (2015). *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K-12 Classrooms* (West Palm Beach, FL: Learning Sciences International).

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Dylan Wiliam emphasises the importance of establishing what learners already know and of seeking accurate evidence about their understanding as lessons unfold. These layers of information help a teacher to do two crucial things: first, plan for new learning to occur and, second, provide feedback to learners that is targeted precisely at moving them forward.

GOOD TEACHING STARTS FROM WHERE THE LEARNERS ARE

■ Make a habit of establishing what the learners already know or can already do before you plan how to teach them. Once this baseline has been established you can compile a list of what the students need to learn in order to move forward. Using the pupils' own questions about their work can be useful here.

■ Instead of using a simple test to establish current levels of understanding, try revealing pupils' thinking by having them generate their own test questions. This is likely to give you valuable insight into what you and they need to do next to improve their grasp of the topic.

FINDING OUT WHAT OUR STUDENTS ARE LEARNING

As Dylan Wiliam points out, it is important to acknowledge that what we have taught pupils is not necessarily the same as what they have learned! Try some of the following ideas for seeking feedback about the impact of your teaching during the lesson itself.

- Instead of eliciting answers from one pupil at a time or assessing only the learning needs of those who volunteer, use one of these techniques to seek feedback from and require involvement from every member of a class:

  - › Ask the learners to write their answers on mini whiteboards and hold them up for your scrutiny.

  - › Ask the learners to hold up lettered cards to indicate their selected answer to multiple choice questions. You might even like to use an iOS or Android app that allows you to scan the room with your own smartphone – recognising the cards, and capturing and recording the particular answers that the students choose.

  - › Once you have posed a probing question to the whole class, give the pupils time to rehearse a possible answer with a classmate and then use a random name generator to select which pupil will share their answer to the question. (These can be found online or

you could use a manual process such as a bingo ball machine or drawing names from a hat.) This technique reinforces the need for every pupil to reflect and prepare a contribution.

■ Listen carefully to the answers the learners give to see what else you can glean about their level of understanding beyond whether or not they knew the correct answer. For example, if you ask the question, 'Why does the word "can't" have an apostrophe in it?' and the pupil answers, 'Because it's a spilt diagram …' you can establish far more than simply the fact that the pupil doesn't understand contractions. For instance, they clearly still don't understand the meaning of 'split digraph' and they probably don't know what a diagram is either!

■ Avoid asking questions that allow the pupils to hit on the correct answer by sheer luck. Instead, ask questions which require the learners to explain their understanding. For example, instead of asking, 'Is "slippery, slimy snake" an example of alliteration?' ask, 'Why is that phrase an example of alliteration?'

■ To keep a careful eye on understanding while you are instructing the class, and to hold every learner accountable for providing you with constant feedback about their understanding, give each learner an item they can display on their desks to indicate whether they do or do not comprehend what is being taught. When a

learner signals their confusion, select a learner who is still indicating that they are confidently grasping the content to answer the confused student's question.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS THAT HELPS THEM TO MOVE THEIR LEARNING FORWARD

Dylan Wiliam stresses that the purpose of giving feedback is to help a learner know how to make progress. If you're not going to require the learner to act on formative feedback, then why give it? A good rule to remember is that if you spend five minutes giving a learner suggestions for how to improve, then that learner should spend at least that amount of time making the improvements. Use the following strategies to make sure the learners engage with and use the feedback you give them.

- Instead of giving your feedback in the form of instructions, try presenting several questions about the work to which that learner must respond.

- Instead of correcting written work, tell the learner how many mistakes there are that need fixing and encourage them to identify and fix them independently.

- Highlight three things in green that successfully meet the objective and highlight one thing in red that needs improving. The learners must use this coding to identify

what they have done well and what their target should be. Alternatively, all four observations about the learner's work can be highlighted in the same colour and it is up to the learner to work out which have met the objective and which one requires development.

■ Write your feedback about your pupils' work on sticky notes instead of directly on their pieces of work. Get the learners to work in groups to decide which piece of feedback was intended for which of their pieces of work.

This book is a gold mine of thinking, ideas and practical solutions.

Dr Richard Gerver, expert in leadership, change and success

The Best of the Best series brings together – for the first time – the most influential voices in education in a format that is concise, insightful and accessible for teachers. Keeping up with the latest and best ideas in education can be a challenge – as can putting them into practice – but this new series is here to help.

In this volume, the expert contributors focus their collective wisdom on the theme of feedback, which – as they ably demonstrate – can be understood and implemented in a number of ways. As with all the books in this series, Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman have developed practical, realistic, cross-curricular and cross-phase strategies to make the most of these important insights in the classroom. Each expert has provided a list of further reading so you can dig deeper as you see fit. In addition, the Teacher Development Trust has outlined ideas for embedding these insights as part of CPD.

Suitable for all educationalists, including teachers and school leaders.

In this book, the hot topic of feedback comes under scrutiny. With a range of contributors, the latest theories explained, and plenty of practical advice, there is something for everyone in this guide.

Sue Cowley, teacher and author of *The Artful Educator*

Featuring guidance from **TEACHER DEVELOPMENT TRUST**

Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman are authors of the bestselling teaching guides *Pimp Your Lesson!* and *Talk-Less Teaching*, and are both experienced classroom teachers, curriculum coordinators and school governors. They present nationally and internationally on teaching and learning, keeping the needs of both the busy teacher and the discerning learner at the heart of their training.