

The Importance of Feedback for Student Learning



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*We all need people who give us feedback.
That's how we improve.*

— Bill Gates

The learning process is intended to be messy. It is intended to be inclusive of mistakes, to accommodate for errors, and to create room for growth through trial and error. In the words of Yoda, “The greatest teacher, failure is.”

Unfortunately, our current K-12 school system is not nearly as accommodating of those errors and important failures.

When Grades Don't Tell the Whole Story

Imagine if a report published the important details of a student's learning journey. *“Over the past quarter, Malik began to flourish as a writer. After a lot of hard work, he can now compose a strong hook and fully developed introductory paragraph with the right amount of background information for context and a thoughtful thesis statement to guide his reader.”* Or, *“Madison is still working hard on writing a complete and effective introductory paragraph. She is a really creative writer and almost always includes a catchy hook to grab the reader's attention, but she's struggling to craft a clear thesis statement that lays out her argument. We're going to continue working on this next quarter.”*

Instead, a report card indicates level of mastery through a simple grade. The difference between an “A” and a “C” may very well mean the same thing as above, but it isn't interpreted that way.

While an “A” means success, the “C” is often taken to mean failure. The problem is that while the learning process itself values formative opportunities that create a lasting impact and push students to learn new information, the schooling system values performance and mastery—aspects of learning that are intended to be the outcome, not the process.

By placing grades on every assignment, whether it be summative or formative, students lose focus on the objective of learning and instead shift to a mindset in which they need to perform with mastery from their very first time working on a problem. In many situations, this actually drives students to find loopholes and shortcuts in search of a good grade. They circumvent the learning process so they are more likely to show success and earn those top marks, even if they have not mastered the material.

The only way to shift out of this grade-oriented myopia is through a fundamental pedagogical shift from focusing on grades and outcomes to [the importance of feedback in student learning](#).



The Value of Grades vs. Learning

There are a few trademark ways in which you can easily determine if a student is placing their value more on the outcome, or grades, rather than on learning itself.

Markers such as class rank and GPA indicate a focus on the former—putting emphasis and value on those who have found ways to master the task, rather than focus on the outcome. This is not to say that there isn't any positive value in the grading system, which can, if done well, create a fair way to assess student work. Over-emphasis on this system, however, is more likely to create anxiety surrounding the need to earn a grade, which replaces the intrinsic value that is placed on learning itself.

A [2002 study out of the University of Michigan](#) found that an incredible 80% of students coordinate their personal value and determination about learning success and confidence within a subject to the grade that they earned in that class. Unfortunately, this sentiment is often echoed within the school system itself.

Students who routinely perform at the top of the class, who have the highest GPA, and who earn the highest test scores are often provided with more opportunities than those who underperform. Yet time and time again it is proven that the students who earn those top grades and who perform best on those tests are not necessarily those with the highest level of intellect, but instead are those who are best acclimated to succeed within the framework of the school system itself.

By shifting the outcome of the learning process to a feedback-oriented system, rather than a grade-dependent system, students are more likely to focus on growth and potential, rather than the ability to master a task on their first attempt.

What is Feedback?

A feedback-oriented learning system doesn't necessarily look too different from a grade-oriented system.

In the classroom, this system can be implemented by any teacher who is interested in shifting the focus of her students from their final grades to mastery of the material itself. Feedback is commentary on the student work, individualized to best accommodate for the needs of each student, personally.

In several respects, it is easier for the teacher and the student to receive a simple grade on an assignment.

A grade is clear. It tells you whether you've met the expectations of the assignment, and it creates a simple way for a teacher to assess your work without having to be caught in nuance and subjective criteria.

However, once the grade is on the paper, it pretty much becomes the only thing that matters. Students are rarely interested in hearing what they did well when they see a low grade. Whatever might have worked in the essay or on the test is outweighed by the overall low performance.

Similarly, a student may be able to entirely overlook a fundamental issue with their work because it did not detract from their grade. An issue like poor grammatical structure in writing assignments is sometimes overlooked since the material being discussed is mastered appropriately.

In cases like these, a high grade is justified, but perhaps isn't doing the student much good, as a valuable learning experience is overlooked.



How to Give Effective Feedback

While feedback is an incredibly helpful tool, there are instances in which the feedback that is provided is not as effective as is needed for positive student growth. The most effective type of feedback is high personalized and highly relevant to the subject area being assessed.

Here are a few guidelines regarding the best use of feedback:

Goal-oriented. Feedback should be tied to specific, measurable learning goals, objectives, or standards. When giving feedback, link your comments to the expectations laid out in the assignment prompt and rubric. Directly reference the prompt and rubric components, using similar language where possible. Help students understand where they are in relation to the stated goals.

Prioritized. Feedback should be concise and focused on the areas of strength and growth that will have the greatest impact on the student's learning. It isn't feasible or advisable to provide feedback on every aspect of student work. Concise, prioritized feedback is more digestible for students and easier to internalize and implement. You will have to make judgement calls on where to focus.

Actionable. Feedback should be so specific that the student immediately knows how to take action. Your comments should clearly describe their successes and shortfalls and directly reference the student's work in order to point the student to their next steps. To advance students' metacognition and enable them to self-assess their work, ask probing questions that will spark thoughtful reflection and a new understanding for how to develop their work.

Student-Friendly. Feedback should be personalized and engaging to ensure it reaches the student. To aid student acceptance of feedback, respond like a reader who is seeking to understand what the student has written. An encouraging, positive tone will go far in helping students accept your feedback and apply it to future work. Be sure to use language that is clear and not too technical.

Ongoing, Consistent and Timely. To be effective, feedback must also be ongoing, consistent, and timely. This means that students need ample opportunities to use feedback and that feedback must be accurate, trustworthy and stable. When feedback isn't timely, students are disengaged and demotivated. It's important to build regular feedback loops into your teaching practice.

Feedback Benefits All Parties

Finally, feedback is something that every student can benefit from, whether it is offered digitally, verbally, or through the traditional written annotations on an assignment. This variety of feedback styles makes it easy to incorporate the feedback-model of student performance and assessment into the contemporary classroom.

Even “A” students benefit from feedback. Those students are typically not challenged as much as they ought to be and may become complacent. While they still may earn an “A” it is helpful to know what they could be doing to improve their work even further - another learning challenge to excite, engage, and push them forward.

Rarely does a student complete an assignment that shows no room for growth or change. Taking the time to provide valuable feedback and to question students on their underlying assumptions can help prevent even the most successful students from falling victim to an outcome-oriented approach to learning.