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# CHALLENGING LEARNING Through **FEEDBACK**

How to Get the Type, Tone and Quality  
of Feedback Right Every Time

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'We only think when confronted with a problem.'

(Dewey, 1916)

# SEVEN STEPS TO FEEDBACK



## 7.0 • BACKGROUND

Please consider the previous six chapters as the warm-up to this chapter. Indeed, everything that has gone before in this book has prepared the ground and given the justification for the Seven Steps to Feedback.

But before we start, here's a just one more justification: In Section 1.0, we began with this quote from Hattie, Biggs and Purdie (1996):

At least 12 previous meta-analyses have included specific information on feedback in classrooms. These meta-analyses included 196 studies and 6,972 effect sizes. The average effect was 0.79 (twice the average effect). To place this average of 0.79 into perspective, it fell in the top 5 to 10 highest influences on achievement. . . . Clearly, feedback can be powerful.

Just look at that: feedback can double the rate of learning! Now that's impressive. And that was published way back in 1982. So it's hardly breaking news!

However, what has puzzled us for years is this:

**If feedback can double the amount of progress students make, and if all teachers are already giving feedback (have you ever heard of teachers who don't?), then why isn't every student making double the rate of progress because of it?**

*This is the most important chapter in the book. It shows exactly how to make feedback work brilliantly.*

Either the research is wrong or teachers aren't really using feedback. Or, more likely, it is because we're not quite using feedback as effectively as we could.

That was what prompted this book and what has led to the development of the Seven Steps to Feedback. If you follow these seven steps, then you will see an improvement in the rate of progress your students make as a result of feedback. Even if they are already making very good progress, these steps will help them learn even more.

## 7.1 • USING THE SEVEN STEPS TO FEEDBACK

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Here are the Seven Steps to Feedback:

0. Create the Culture
1. Agree on Learning Goals
2. Draft
3. Self/Peer Review
4. Edit
5. Teacher Feedback
6. Complete
7. Grade\*

OK, so there are actually eight steps, *but* you will notice we have starred the last one. That is because it is not strictly necessary. We will explore the reasons for this soon.

The first one is labelled as Step 0 because it isn't really part of the Seven Steps! However, it is *very* important because without the right culture in place, the Seven Steps to Feedback will have only limited success. So it needs to be in there but as a precursor to the Seven Steps.

So in actual fact, there are Six Steps to Feedback plus one prelude and one optional addendum. A bit of a mouthful, isn't it? Let's just stick with the Seven Steps to Feedback (Nottingham, 2016).

Here, then, are the steps . . .

### Step 0: Create the Culture

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Before beginning the Seven Steps to Feedback, you will need to build a culture of trust, engagement and support. Without these conditions, feedback is likely to be rejected, avoided, resented or responded to under duress. That said, high-quality feedback will itself contribute to the creation of such conditions. So in many ways, the culture will influence the feedback and feedback will influence the culture.

Creating the right culture for learning is not one of the seven steps, but it is a necessary condition for success.

#### Create a culture that says:

- **We often make mistakes.**
- **We believe mistakes are a normal part of learning.**

- **We don't have all the answers.**
- **We look to others for support and guidance.**
- **We welcome feedback as part of our learning journey.**
- **We examine our mistakes as a way to learn most from them.**
- **We are always trying to improve the way in which we give, receive and act upon feedback.**

Also, make sure you remind everyone responsible for giving feedback:

1. Feedback is most welcome when it is learning-orientated rather than performance-orientated.
2. Feedback is much more effective when it is regular, cumulative and developmental rather than random and unconnected.
3. People respond best to feedback when it is personalised, well timed and constructive.
4. We should all be seen to positively welcome and act upon feedback. 'Walking the talk' is crucial for the credibility of feedback.
5. Convincing your students that 'easy is boring' and 'challenging is interesting' helps them be more open to feedback.
6. Students are more likely to seek out and welcome feedback when they are engaged in tasks that lead to a *eureka* moment (see Section 8.0).
7. Feedback should be a constructive conversation about a student's progress towards an agreed-upon goal. It should never be given – or perceived – as personal criticism.

Remember that feedback is influenced by the prevailing learning culture and not just by the relationship between the individuals giving and receiving the feedback. So pay close attention to the learning culture, and ensure you do all you can to build and share the positive aspects of that culture.

## Step 1: Agree on Learning Goals

Start the Seven Steps to Feedback by agreeing on the learning goals (Learning Intentions and Success Criteria). If your students don't understand their learning goals, then feedback is not going to work well. So do all you can to get this part right! That's why Chapters 4 and 5 are the longest in this book. They are there to give you inspiration and guidance in creating inspirational and appropriate Learning Intentions and Success Criteria.

Look back at the 'draw a house' exercise in Section 4.0. If you followed that through from start to finish, then you will have noticed just how much better your feedback could have been if you'd known the Success Criteria beforehand. Similarly, with the stories about Rocky Owen (Section 4.0.6) and Frank Egan (Section 4.0.7), we showed you how important an understanding of the learning goals is for your students' chances of making progress. We also emphasised in Section 4.0.5 how the setting of learning goals does not need to inhibit creativity, just as long as you introduce them skilfully.

The Seven Steps to Feedback should always begin with agreeing on the learning goals. Without this agreement, feedback is unlikely to work well.

To add to all this, we would go as far as to say that if your students don't understand their learning goals, then you should not rely on feedback being of much use! As discussed in Chapter 6, about the SOLO taxonomy, if students are at the 'no idea' or 'basic ideas' stage of learning, then feedback will be relatively meaningless. You should definitely use encouragement, praise and refocusing techniques but not feedback; it is unlikely to be effective.

Figure 28 is another example of a set of learning goals. It shows a set of Success Criteria that will help fourteen-year-olds develop an understanding of Pythagoras's theorem.

Figure 28 is an example of the sort of learning goals that might be agreed upon at the beginning of a maths lesson.

► **Figure 28: Pythagoras Success Criteria**

Skill	Not Shown	Sometimes Shown	Mostly Shown	Always Shown
Recall the formula				😊
Label the triangle's sides				😊
Find the hypotenuse				😊
Rearrange the formula to find a shorter side				😊
Solve compound shapes using diagrams		😐		
Answer worded questions (in a sentence)	😞			
Rounding off			😊	
Quality of working out			😊	
Extension questions		😐		

There are many nice aspects of this self-assessment sheet. Firstly, the Success Criteria in the left-hand column leave students in no doubt as to what they should be aiming to achieve.

Secondly, moving the faces from the left-hand columns to the furthest right-hand column will give a sense of progress. A snapshot such as this will also indicate, at a glance, how a student is getting on and what the next steps should be.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this prompt sheet will help students answer the key stages associated with the three feedback questions:

1. Understanding the goal or Learning Intention
2. Knowing where they are in relation to the goal
3. Realising what they need to do to bridge the gap between their current position and their learning goal

Other examples of learning goals might include the following:

For younger children: When painting a picture, focus on three things: (1) use the whole page, (2) use at least three colours and (3) experiment with mixing different colours together to see what new shades can be created.

Or in swimming: As you practise your freestyle, there are two key things I want you to concentrate on: make sure your elbow is the first part of your arm to exit the water (not your hand or shoulder), and do not over-rotate your head when turning to breathe – just turn your head enough to allow half of your mouth to breathe.

Or with group work: Whilst working in groups, I'd like you to pause every twenty minutes to give each other feedback about giving reasons, connecting to what other people have said and showing that you are listening as others are talking.

## Step 2: Draft

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Once your students understand the learning goals (Learning Intentions) and what they should do to make progress (Success Criteria), then they ought to be ready to begin.

If their learning involves producing something (e.g., an essay or a model), then encourage them to say they are doing their 'first draft' rather than their 'work'. Similarly, if they are performing something (e.g., a physical skill) then get them to talk in terms of their 'first attempt' rather than their 'doing it'. The differences might seem subtle, but they can be significant.

'First draft' implies that there will be some editing to follow. It is the same with 'first attempt'; there is the inference that adjustments will be made. Whereas if your students talk about 'doing their work' or 'doing it', then they might think that (a) if it doesn't work then they are a failure or (b) once they've done it once then there is nothing more to be done. In both these cases, learning is likely to be constrained by lack of revisions and edits.

## Step 3: Self/Peer Review

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Once your students have completed their first attempt or their first draft, then they should engage in a round of self or peer feedback.

**Self and peer feedback is a vital step in helping your students grow their assessment capabilities. Resist the urge to offer your insights at this stage. Encourage, and perhaps support, but do not lead this stage of the feedback process. Let your students develop their independent learning strategies.**

Here are some examples of learning goals that might be agreed at the beginning of an art lesson, swimming lesson or group activity.

Students should think of their initial steps towards the learning goal as a first draft rather than as 'doing their work'. In this way, they are more likely to assume that edits and redrafts will follow.

It is important that students are given the opportunity to develop their own assessment capabilities. For this reason, teachers should not be too quick to offer feedback to their students. They should wait until Step 5 in the feedback process.

Based on the feedback students have given themselves or each other, they should now edit their work so that it is as good as it can possibly be without the intervention of a teacher.

The main feedback that teachers offer should be given only after students have given themselves feedback and edited their work (or performance) as a result.

Remind your students that they will be able to generate useful feedback for themselves and each other if they follow these steps:

1. Look again at the Learning Intentions (LI) and Success Criteria (SC). These represent your learning goals. They help you answer the first of the three feedback questions: What are you trying to achieve?
2. Now compare your first draft against the Learning Intentions and Success Criteria. Which criteria have you met, which have you exceeded and which are you still working towards? If you are reviewing with a partner, then remember to ask them to explain the reasons for their appraisals (e.g., Why do you say I have not quite met those criteria yet? What is missing or needs changing?).
3. Based on your answers to the questions above, list the actions you could take to move closer to your learning goal. If this creates a long list of actions, then prioritise them by choosing which ones you should do first, second, third and so on.

In summary, you are seeking to answer the three feedback questions:

1. What am I trying to achieve?
2. How much progress have I made so far?
3. What should I do next?

#### Step 4: Edit

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Based on the feedback they have given themselves or each other, your students should now edit their work (or have another go if the context is a physical activity).

This does *not* mean that they should redo the whole thing! Instead, they should make additions and corrections. This could be done with a different-coloured pen if doing written work, by using Track Changes if doing something digital or by attempting the skill again if engaged in physical learning.

#### Exam Technique

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As well as teaching your students how to give themselves and each other high-quality feedback, Steps 1 to 4 of the Seven Steps to Feedback will also help them develop good exam technique. Namely, (1) read the question carefully and make sure you know what is being asked of you, (2) write your first draft, (3) look back at the exam question and check whether you have answered all aspects of it by comparing your draft against the criteria and, (4) if needed, edit your answer before moving on to the next question.

#### Step 5: Teacher Feedback

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Only once your students have completed Steps 1 to 4 is it time for some teacher-led (or other adult-led) feedback. Of course, you might have been giving feedback, guidance and encouragement throughout the process, but Step 5 of the Seven Steps to Feedback is the time to give your more systematic feedback.

#### Advice, Advice, Advice

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There are many conventions popular in schools – such as ‘Three Stars and a Wish’ – but many of these are built on the belief that students need to hear lots of positive messages for every negative comment. As we hope you will have understood from reading through this book, feedback should not be viewed in terms of being negative or positive. Of course, feedback generally *is* viewed in these terms, but that doesn’t mean that it *should* be!

**So long as you get the feedback culture right (see Chapter 3 as well as Section 2.3.1), such that your students view feedback as information (neither good nor bad) that can be used to make progress, then the best kind of feedback is advice and suggestions. Not a little bit of 'negative stuff' mixed in with lots of positives. It should be advice, advice, advice!**

Advice would include ideas about what could be changed, amended, left alone, added to or scrapped altogether. And it should always be focussed on the task or the process, not on the students themselves, for example: 'clarify your conclusion by shortening your sentences and making them punchier' rather than 'there is some need for clarity here. I want you to try harder'. For more about avoiding student-focussed feedback, see Section 1.5.

Also please remember that when giving feedback, you should be less of a referee and more of a coach.

Coach, Not Referee

► **Figure 29: Coach or Referee?**



When giving feedback, teachers should think of themselves as a coach rather than as a referee.

If we were to say that a referee adjudicates and decides whereas a coach supports, challenges, trains, stretches and instructs, then it is very obvious that our role as teachers is closer to that of a coach. Of course, sometimes we should be the referee (when invigilating for exams, for example). But most of the time, we should be the coach. That is assuming we want to help our students make more progress rather than simply check what they are able to do!

Sticking with the analogy of a coach, consider the similarities between what an excellent coach might do and what you might do as a teacher.

When acting as a coach, a teacher will challenge, encourage, demonstrate and guide. When acting as a referee, a teacher is more likely to overemphasise corrective feedback (see Section 2.2).

An excellent coach would do the following:

1. Welcome their team and engage them in an enjoyable warm-up (for non-sporty activities, this might be a brain teaser or stimulus for thinking).
2. Give them a clear sense of what the focus for the session is (identify the Learning Intentions).
3. Ask them for suggestions about how they will achieve the learning goal or give them a clear set of instructions (this is identifying the Success Criteria).
4. Invite a more proficient performer (perhaps from another team) to demonstrate the skill (or share examples via video).
5. Give the players time to experiment and try out the skills (first draft).
6. Circulate around the players, giving individualised attention including feedback, encouragement and additional challenges.
7. Split the players into groups and ask them to give each other feedback about how to improve the skills they are currently working on (self/peer review).
8. Give more time to practise (edit).
9. Offer expert guidance on how to improve. Those players who have met or exceeded the target would be given additional challenges or be asked to apply the skills in a game, those who are nearly there would be asked to keep working on the final bits of the skill, and those who are a long way off would be given some support so that they feel as if the session has not been entirely wasted and that they have made some progress.
10. Most training sessions would then finish off with a game in which all players would be expected to try out their new skills (reiterating context and purpose).

Compare this to an excellent referee, who would do the following:

1. Remind the players to play fair.
2. Enforce the rules of the game.
3. Act as timekeeper.
4. Punish serious offences.
5. Keep the game flowing as much as possible.
6. Provide the appropriate authorities with a match report.
7. Ensure the safety of the players.

Of course, teaching *is* different from the world of sport. But there are many parallels. And by sharing this perhaps overworked example, we hope we've drawn attention to how much more powerful feedback can be when you think of yourself as the coach rather than the referee!

Stick to the Point

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**As you review your students' work, make sure you refer all feedback back to the LI and SC. Don't veer off into territory that your students have not anticipated.**

For example, if the LI and SC are the same as in Section 4.4.3 (shown again below), then resist the temptation to give feedback about other criteria such as spelling, choice of nouns, style of handwriting or overall appearance of the writing. That is not to say that these aren't important – of course they are. But it can be distracting and sometimes be disheartening for your students to have done their best with one set of targets, only for you to focus on other aspects of their work.

### Learning Intention

To write a mystery story that uses descriptive words to create a scary atmosphere

### Success Criteria

To reach our learning goal, we will be able to:

- Set the scene in the opening paragraph.
- Build up tension/suspense.
- Use spooky adjectives and powerful verbs.
- End with a cliffhanger.

A lot of teachers we work with have a problem with this advice. They say that spelling and grammar are *always* important. And they are (to a point). But imagine if we asked a non-native English speaker to read something in English out loud and the agreed purpose was to check that they could read English. How frustrating would it be if we then commented on their accent? For example:

Too Danish: don't pronounce *t* as a *d*. It is 'computer' not 'compuder'. Or too American: you should say 'tomarto' not 'tomaydo'.

Or what if a child asks a parent to help with finding out some information about the water cycle but that parent then spends the time criticising (as it feels to the child) the child's handwriting and lack of energy (even though the homework is indeed deathly boring).

Indeed, as we have written this book, we've asked different people for different types of feedback at different times. We've shared the practical examples with teacher colleagues to ask them to check clarity and suitability for their students. We've shown the design elements to graphic designers to see if they think everything is clear and illustrative. And we've talked through the concepts with our Challenging Learning team to ensure there is no conflict of message between the workshops we deliver and the ideas we've shared in this book. Now, if any of these trusted givers of feedback had remarked on punctuation, grammar or spelling, then we would not have thanked them for it! We know all of that is important, but at the time of recording our thoughts, all we want to know is do the ideas make sense, do they flow from one to the other, are they worth sharing? Not should we be using the British or American of certain words, or should we use *e.g.* or *eg* or *for example*?!

One more example, if we haven't bored you enough already. If you look at Section 4.6, you will see another example of what we mean. In that section, there is a Criteria Diamond showing nine behaviours that collaborative groups would use when being fully functional. However, as we noted in that section, it would be very difficult for each group to focus on all nine criteria all at the same time. So our advice then was to get your students to select three criteria to focus on at any given time. And so it is now with the advice in this section: when giving feedback, stick to the point. Make sure your feedback relates to the agreed-upon Learning Intentions and Success Criteria.

Of course, if your students have met all the Success Criteria, then that is a different matter. In that instance, you would need to give feedback relating to something else. Something more challenging. But that is more about making sure targets are appropriate and individualised than it is about veering off the point.

Teacher feedback should be related to the agreed-upon learning goals. Otherwise, what was the point of setting the learning goals in the first place?

## Nota Bene

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A teacher's feedback should be given before students finish their work or performance. That way, students are much more likely to apply – and therefore learn from – their teacher's advice.

Once they receive feedback from their teachers, students should edit their work (or performance) one last time before it is graded or finalised.

Two final points about Step 5 of the Seven Steps to Feedback:

1. Your feedback should be given before your students have finished their work (or their performance), not afterwards.
2. Do *not* give a grade or a mark at this stage of the Seven Steps. If you feel the need (or perhaps because you are compelled) to give a grade, then save that until Step 7.

## Step 6: Complete

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Now your students should finish off their piece of work or performance. Your students will have completed their first draft, reviewed it themselves or with each other, edited it and then received brilliant advice from you. So now they are ready to make the final adjustments to the piece.

It is frankly baffling how many of us give feedback to our students *after* they've finished their work. Why would we do that? If ever there was a case of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted, then that is it.

Of course, many of us will make comments such as, 'The next time you do a similar piece of work, don't forget to do x, y and z.' But unless the students you teach are more motivated, organised and have superior long-term memories than all the students we've ever taught, then it's difficult to imagine many of them making the best use of your feedback! Imagine, though, if we were to give feedback *before* they finished and then ask them to go ahead and complete the work. Just imagine how much more they could achieve then!

But you know what some teachers have actually asked: 'Isn't it cheating to show kids how to improve their work?'

Ummm, no! That's normally what we mean by teaching!

'But won't they do better than they could otherwise?' they retort.

'Hopefully yes!' That's kind of the point about feedback: it should help people achieve more than they could otherwise! That's why it's such an effective pedagogical tool. It helps people learn. But only if they make good use of it.

**So that's why we should all be giving feedback to our students *before* they finish their piece of work or their performance: to help them achieve more than they could do by themselves.**

Of course, you can't give feedback before they finish if your students are completing an externally assessed piece of work or a national exam. That really would be cheating. But in the other ninety-something per cent of the time, when your students are learning rather than being tested, then make sure you increase the likelihood that they will learn from and apply your feedback by giving it to them before they finish. As we said before, you should be the coach, not the referee (most of the time).

## Step 7: Grade (If Needed)

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It is a well-rehearsed argument that grades do very little for the learning process. Indeed, as Butler as well as Black and Wiliam (see Section 1.6) have pointed out, grades often diminish the power of feedback so much that giving feedback with grades has the equivalent impact of giving no feedback at all!

**So rule number one: keep grades and feedback separate. If you feel compelled to grade (perhaps by habit or external expectation), then make sure you give advice-driven feedback first and allow your students the opportunity to improve as a result. Only then should you grade the work; or even better, get your students to grade their own work.**

Grading *can* help your students, but only if they

- understand the criteria used to determine the grade,
- can identify the next steps they could take to improve their performance,
- understand the grading system well enough to know what level they need to be at to achieve their long-term goals (of, for example, an A grade in the end-of-year exams).

Another way to make grading more powerful is to get your students to grade their own work. Of course, many teachers will say that their students can't do this, but we hope by reading this book that you might say they can't *yet* but they *can* learn how to!

Grading should not be thought of as part of the feedback process because of its minimal (and sometimes negative) effect on learning. But if grades are going to be given, then they should come right at the end and be kept separate from the formative feedback given at Steps 3 and 5 of the Seven Steps to Feedback.

## 7.2 • THE SEVEN STEPS TO FEEDBACK: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

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Some years ago, it was commonplace for leaders to visit classrooms to watch teachers *teach*. This is the wrong emphasis. Why focus on the teaching when it's the *learning* that matters most? Far too often, teaching doesn't lead to the intended learning – and sometimes even gets in the way of learning. Whereas at other times, the best learning takes place when there is no teaching!

Thankfully things have moved on since then, and now it is far more commonplace for leaders to observe learning (often asking students the three key feedback questions: What are you trying to achieve? How much progress have you made so far? What should you do next?) However, the profession doesn't seem to have moved on so quickly when it comes to feedback: many people are still looking at the feedback itself rather than the *effect* of the feedback.

**So let's be clear: The quality of feedback should be judged not on what is transmitted but on what is received and applied.**

Just as teaching is the transmission of information and learning is the receiving and application of that information, so feedback is the transmission of information and the