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Instructional Feedback.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### What Is Instructional Feedback All About?

A theory in physics states that there are an infinite number of universes, and we simply inhabit one of them. So imagine that for Kiya Reilly, a fifth-grade student who is awaiting the receipt of the essay she handed in last Friday, the universe splits into six different realities as Ms. MacLemore gives back her essay. In these different universes, Kiya receives the following feedback:

Universe 1	Universe 2	Universe 3
<p><i>Kiya, what an interesting story! You really got my attention and held it. Let's work on a couple of things before we move on to publishing it. In particular, let's look at how you are presenting dialog . . .</i></p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>	<p><i>The story is good here, but your dialog isn't how people really talk to one another. Do you talk to your friends that way? See if you can sharpen that up.</i></p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>	<p><i>You're such a good writer! Keep up the great work!</i></p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>
Universe 4	Universe 5	Universe 6
<p><i>There are a lot of errors here. See if you can spot some of them on your own.</i></p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>	<p><i>This is one of the better papers handed in on this assignment, but there is a ways to go on it.</i></p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>	<p>✓+</p> <p><b>What Really Happened at the Mall</b></p> <p><b>Kiya Reilly</b></p> <p><b>I didn't really think about it. Maybe I should have. But when I saw Mom standing in the checkout with that ugly . . .</b></p>

In which universe does Kiya eagerly engage in improving this particular essay and think about how she can make first drafts of future work stronger? Which universe would you choose to live in?

Imagine you are Kiya receiving these different feedback messages. The differences may seem subtle, but if you read each of them carefully and then check your reactions to them, in terms of both how you feel and what you might do on a revision, you might find the differences are real and important:

- Feedback 1 addresses you directly. This seems like a discussion between people who have a history and like one another. It also seems to say that Ms. MacLemore and you are in this together. It is very engaging, encourages more work on the story, and suggests that there is a positive goal to work toward, as well as that others will read this work.
- Feedback 2 has a nice comment on the story overall, but the rest of that comment might be taken one of two ways: as a rather harsh criticism (are you that oblivious to how you and your friends talk?) or as a suggestion on how to improve (think about how you really talk and then go with that in your dialog).
- Feedback 3 might be very encouraging and cause you to think that writing really is your strong area, but then you don't do so well in math. What does that mean?
- Feedback 4 just focuses on the negative. Did Ms. MacLemore like the story at all? Why didn't she comment on what you actually wrote rather than what you got wrong? It does encourage you to search for errors and thus engage in active processing, but are you ready to do it on your own?
- Feedback 5 simply compares you to others, and says to work more. On what? Go where? How about some advice?
- Feedback 6 might engender a "So what?" reaction, but if you had worked hard on this story, it might cause you to wonder why you put so much effort in, and cause you to back off some on your next piece.

For us as teachers, the success of our instructional efforts is defined by the success of our students. Their achievement is our achievement. They are the vehicle through which our efforts are realized. One of the most important ways we reach our students is through the feedback we provide on their work.

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For a high school English teacher with 100 students in four or five classes, written feedback on assignments (as opposed to oral feedback) may be the most important form of communication with students. For a primary teacher with 25 children in the class, feedback can be a source of encouragement, reflection, and the development of self-efficacy. It can also communicate that the teacher is really listening and cares about what each student is doing. For example, for a music teacher working one-on-one with students, feedback may represent a constant dialog with countless loops per lesson.



Feedback in a music lesson is a constant dialog.

As much as feedback can encourage, support, and inspire, feedback that is given thoughtlessly or harshly can engender anxiety, fear, or a loss of self-efficacy.

Seeing “This is rubbish!” on your work could cause you to avoid similar tasks and engender a slew of negative emotions. Despite the fact that scholars may still argue over the strength of feedback’s effect on student performance, learning, and personality, we know that certain types of feedback can define students’ lives.

In life, we receive feedback in all sorts of situations, ranging from medical tests, to interpersonal interactions, to baking a cake. Sometimes we eagerly anticipate that feedback, and other times we dread it. Have you ever wondered what causes that eagerness or fear? What does good feedback look like, and what does it do? What makes feedback effective—and effective for what? Are there any universal rules for providing or receiving feedback, or do the rules vary by context and by situation?

Our goal in this book is simple: We want to help you to provide the kind of feedback to your students that will foster their academic growth, build their sense of self-efficacy, and help them to critically evaluate their progress as learners. We won’t provide a prescription for offering feedback simply because we are all different and each learning situation is different. What we will provide is an approach to thinking about feedback,

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maybe better described as a lens for looking at how to provide feedback, in order to maximize its usefulness to students and to build a better learning relationship with students. We will also discuss instructional supports that teachers can implement to encourage students to engage in self-feedback. After all, we want students to grow and develop into autonomous learners who can generate their own feedback based on the information they receive from teachers, peers, or the task itself. We also hope to have some fun along the way and to provide a wealth of practical examples for you to take back to your classroom.

## A POINT OF VIEW

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Although we don't want to burden you with a philosophy of education, allow us to give you what we might call "a point of view." We believe that you are concerned about your students: their educational growth, their development as individuals, their interactions with others, and their happiness. We are also concerned about you: your professional development, your work–life balance, your relationship with family and friends, and *your* happiness. So in this book, we do our best to provide you with practical, *usable* advice about how to provide feedback that not only is student-centered, based on solid evidence, and effective, but also respects your time and resources.

As teachers, we tend to think of feedback as the comments we make on a student's essay or a mathematics test. We look for mistakes and provide either a correct answer or a better alternative. We then put a grade at the top of the paper and move on. Research shows us that this is a relatively ineffective approach if our goal is to facilitate learning, increase performance, or improve students' approaches and strategies of learning.

We propose a different point of view on feedback. Instead of viewing it as basically corrective and grade-oriented, what if we consider feedback as another form of instruction? What if we weren't solely interested in student learning and growth, but also cared a great deal about their emotional well-being? And what if we acknowledged that we are working with students toward a shared goal? Instead of pointing out errors and comparing students to their classmates, we could say things like "I really like the way you organized your presentation! I felt that some graphs needed more information, so let's focus on these for your next talk." This example feedback message attends to emotion, provides advice on how to improve rather than focusing on what was wrong, and, most importantly, offers another try.

This is precisely the perspective we present in this book. How can we look at students as if they were our partners in learning? How would that change our behavior? And how can we do that with 25 children in a fifth-grade class, or 100 students in first-year high school English? Admittedly, it's a challenge. But we have some great ideas that we think will help.



What if we thought of our students as our partners in learning?

Source: [istock.com/xavierarnau](https://www.istock.com/xavierarnau)

Let's get started.

### EXEMPLARY EXEMPLAR: LA MAESTRA

One of your authors and his wife were watching a cooking class in Tuscany, where a dozen tourists were learning how to make ravioli of different colors. Eleven students were succeeding nicely and having a great time, but one lady at the end of the long table had a green pesto pasta that looked like soup. She was clearly distraught, and her husband was teasing her. The instructor noticed the interaction and went to address the potential disaster. We had been admiring the quality of the instructor's teaching and enthusiasm, and asked each other, "How is she going to handle this?" Her student was close to bursting out in tears.

The instructor glided past the other students and when she came upon the green ooze exclaimed, "This is *beautiful!* Now, we make it *perfect!*" The woman absolutely beamed, and the instructor went on to tell the whole group, "When we have the color beautiful like this, we just add more flour, and the pasta is complete." The key here is that the instructor recognized the emotional component of the situation, defused it, and then was prepared to provide feedback. She used it as a teachable moment to all, thus sparing any sense of failure for the one student and allowing all students to nod in appreciation of this important feedback. A masterful move.

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Feedback is important in all forms of teaching!

Source: [istock.com/xavierarnau](https://www.istock.com/xavierarnau)

## WHAT IS THE PROMISE OF FEEDBACK?

We chose to include *Promise* in the subtitle for this book because we believe feedback is one of the most important and influential aspects of teaching. Feedback points out mistakes and celebrates successes, encourages additional effort, convinces students that they can succeed, makes suggestions on more productive routes of working, gives students

Feedback is teaching based on current information.

new ways of thinking about their work, and offers students the opportunity to take another shot at what they are doing. You do that normally in your everyday teaching. But you can bring that same perspective to providing feedback as well. You can think of it like this: *Feedback is teaching based on current information.*

That teaching can consist of information provided to the class as a whole, especially when you see many students having the same difficulty or ready for the same extended idea, or to individuals when you see particular needs or opportunities. More than anything else, powerful feedback *helps*. Therefore, the most important question we need to ask ourselves with every form of feedback should be “Is this helping?”

The most helpful type of feedback must be used by students.

Studies on feedback show that it isn't always effective and can, under certain conditions, actually be harmful! But this research also shows that when used properly, feedback can be one of the most powerful instructional tools available to teachers. To realize that power, however, feedback must be received by learners, clearly understood, and acted upon. Just like the most

perfectly delivered lecture must be processed by students to be effective, the most helpful type of feedback must be used by students.

In the following chapters, we will lay out our ideas about feedback and provide examples, metaphors, and approaches to thinking about critical issues.

## AN EXAMPLE FROM THE CLASSROOM: HOW MUCH FEEDBACK AND ABOUT WHAT?

Donna Price and her colleagues (2017) conducted a study of her middle school English classes as part of her doctoral research. She asked students to prepare an essay and hand it in for marking. She provided individualized feedback to all students and then gave them the chance to revise their essays before receiving a grade. She found the students made substantial gains from their first essay to the revised version of it. So far so good. But what was surprising was what the students said about the process when she discussed it with them in focus groups. The first surprise Donna got was how enthusiastic students were about this process. She reported that the students told her that nobody had ever given them feedback and then let them work on their essays more before getting a grade. We heard similar sentiments in our own studies with university and high school students (Lipnevich et al., 2014; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009a, 2009b). Students are grateful to have a chance to use the feedback they receive and are eager to implement it to enhance their writing. So, no matter how spectacular the feedback you provide at the end of the course is, without giving students the opportunity and incentive to use this feedback, you may be sure that your effort was wasted. To reiterate, feedback can only be effective if students actively engage in it, understand it, and get the opportunity to try what they are doing again.

### FEEDBACK ON FEEDBACK: ERROR AS INSIGHT

$$\begin{array}{r}
 \text{©} \\
 583 \rightarrow 400 + 170 + 13 \\
 - 295 \\
 \hline
 200 + 90 + 5 \\
 \hline
 600 + 260 + 18 = 878
 \end{array}$$

Here is a rather interesting mathematics problem that led to an obvious mistake. Martin has properly regrouped the number 583 into  $400 + 170 + 13$ . Thus, he can perform the subtractions necessary to complete the problem. To our somewhat traditional approach to subtraction, it seems a bit cumbersome to do the problem this

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way, but let's not worry about that. Martin has done everything correctly except for adding the numbers at the end instead of subtracting them.

What does this tell us, and how should we respond to Martin? We could just put an *X* on the problem and move on to the next problem. Or we could write a quick note to Martin saying that he added instead of subtracting. Or, we could ask Martin to see if he can find his mistake. Or, we could ask Martin to check all his work on this assignment and see if he wants to make any changes before getting a final grade. What would help Martin most?

As to what it tells us about Martin, we might conclude that it was just a brief lapse of concentration. But does it also tell us that Martin isn't careful about his work, or that he doesn't check to see if answers are reasonable, or that maybe Martin focuses too much on details and loses the main idea or goal? Do his answers on other problems confirm or disconfirm any of these hunches?

The second thing that came up in the discussions was equally important. They told her that they really appreciated how hard she worked on making comments, but it was really more than they could handle. They got a bit lost in all the feedback.

Two points here: The first is that students need to comprehend the feedback they receive and be able to translate their understanding into action. The second is that it is important to think seriously about how much feedback to give based on the learning goal of any given assignment or assessment. You cannot do everything at once. Humans have somewhat limited cognitive resources, and delivering too much information results in what scientists call a cognitive overload. If it's too extensive, students will be overwhelmed and overchallenged, and won't progress as much. With written work, we must always keep in mind the goal of the feedback. Too often we miss the message students are trying to communicate because of shortcomings in their communication skills. Teachers are often the only ones reading students' work, and we must be sure to comment on the ideas presented as well as the skill with which those ideas are communicated. Students' ideas deserve our respect and careful feedback along with clear opportunities for revision.

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## A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT FEEDBACK

As authors, we have given more workshops to teachers than we care to tally. We are academics by nature, and so we like to explain things, cite references and research studies, and consider the philosophical nature of things.

### YES, BUT . . .

"Yes, but can you just show us how to do this?"

We will forsake our nature here and start this book out by providing you with a simple recipe for how to provide feedback. And here it is:

### DISH: EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

#### Ingredients:

- Care
- Planning
- Organization
- Follow-through
- Student focus
- Honesty
- Timeliness
- Clarity
- Insight
- Knowledge of the subject matter
- Pedagogical content knowledge (how to teach this content)
- Consideration of emotions that this message may elicit

#### Directions (see details in the text that follows):

- Plan your assessment.
- Give it to your students.
- Carefully consider what your students hand in.
- Craft a response.
- Provide students the opportunity and a reason to respond to your feedback.

We will discuss the “ingredients” in detail throughout this book. In some cases the meaning is clear: Honesty is honesty—we don’t want to lie to our students. Some are not as straightforward. Take timeliness, for example. For burgeoning violinists, timeliness is critical. Teachers must deliver feedback on the spot, adjust the bow, and correct the string crossings. For more complex tasks, however, the timeliness of feedback is not important. In fact, delayed feedback is usually more effective on more complex tasks. Sometimes we need to take a break and do something else before returning, afresh, to the assignment we worked on. Interleaving, or alternating learning tasks, has been consistently shown to improve learning. So, please don’t feel guilty if you are delaying your comments on students’ essays until next week.

*Please don't feel guilty if you are delaying your comments on students' essays until next week.*

This, by the way, is the kind of research finding that makes us really happy. Now let's elaborate a bit on the directions:

*Plan your assessment:* Start by blending your knowledge of the subject matter with your pedagogical content knowledge and student focus, and generate a vehicle through which you can learn about your students' progress. This could be an assignment, a quiz, homework, or a performance. It should be something that will give your students an opportunity to show you what they can do and that will actively engage their abilities and enthusiasm. Also make sure it fits with your calendar. Will you be able to get it back to them in a timely fashion? Do you have them handing it in at the same time you are planning on a ninth birthday party for your son or daughter? Planning and organization are key here. And please note that you do not have to develop it yourself. There are lots of resources to go to in order to find a good assessment: colleagues, the internet, your files from past years. Teachers love to share. If you are having trouble or think your approach isn't all that you want, get help on this!

*Give it to your students:* Make sure you give students enough time to do a good job on the assessment, and to the degree possible, give them some choice in how they execute it. Make sure it fits with their calendar. What else do they have going on? And be certain to check your own calendar as well. When they hand this in, will you have the time to assess what they've done and provide good feedback? Make sure the directions are clear from the outset. One thing we have found that students truly dislike is if you change the requirements midstream. Student focus, planning, and care are key ingredients here.

*Carefully consider what your students hand in:* We recommend "reading while sitting on your hands" as a first pass on assignments. You can always work on grammar, spelling, arithmetic errors, and the like on a second pass. First, focus on what the basic idea of what the assessment was about. What have your students shown you with regard to what they know and can do? You should work toward understanding what generated the response they gave you. What strengths do you see that you can build on? Where there are weaknesses, what appears to be the origins of those difficulties? Insight, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge are important ingredients here.

*Craft a response:* Next, decide what you want to say to your students. Where is your focus? Be sure to include strengths. And then decide how you are going to say it.

What would you want to receive if you were in their shoes? How would you put this to your own children (or nieces and nephews)? John Hattie recommends feedback that he calls "high-information," and we agree with this notion (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wisniewski et al., 2020). High-information feedback not only corrects mistakes; it gives the student strategies for avoiding them in the future, and sometimes ideas on when to use which strategies—more on that down the road a bit. Next, get the feedback presented in an organized fashion. This part of the recipe calls upon substantial measures of care,

*The goal is almost always growth and an eye toward the future as opposed to making the current assignment as good as possible.*

organization, and clarity, and do not forget honesty. It is possible to be kind and honest at the same time.

*Provide students the opportunity and a reason to respond to your feedback:* Complete the cycle! Let the students work on their skills. This might be on this assignment (maybe for an improved grade) or the next assignment. The goal is almost always growth and an eye toward the future as opposed to making the current assignment as good as possible.

## SUMMARY AND TAKEAWAYS

In this chapter, we introduced our general view on feedback, provided some examples of good feedback, described issues that are encountered in providing feedback, and discussed a classroom example of feedback in action. Our focus is on student-centered feedback driven by concerns for student growth and well-being. For feedback to be effective, it has to be well designed by teachers, and well understood, engaged in, and acted on by students (see, e.g., Parr & Timperley, 2010). As teachers, we need to think carefully about what aspects of student learning and development we want to focus on in any given formative activity. How much feedback should we provide, on what should it focus, and what level of depth and detail is needed? How can we ensure that students “take on” the advice and feedback they are given? You do these things normally in your everyday teaching. But you can bring that perspective to providing feedback as well. You can think of instructional feedback simply in this way: *Instructional feedback is teaching based on current information.*

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

At the conclusion of each chapter, we provide a few questions for you to consider yourself and/or discuss with colleagues. Here are questions from this chapter:

1. How do you think about your students when you are providing feedback on their work?
2. What is your goal in providing feedback?
3. How stressful are time demands on you when marking papers and engaging in other forms of feedback?
4. When you provide feedback, is your focus on the work at hand, or do you think about future assignments/performance as well?