

The Power of Feedback

Do you find that students simply aren’t meeting your expectations? Do they seem surprised when they are unsuccessful, or successful? Do they complain that they are not sure what your expectations are? Perhaps what they need is more feedback from you.

In academic settings, feedback is information about how well a learner is moving along a path toward a desired goal. The goal may be to demonstrate a skill, understand a concept, meet requirements of a class project, or successfully achieve course objectives. Quality feedback can be used by the learner to improve academic performance.

The topic of feedback is taken up in a recent chapter of the American Psychological Association’s [Applying Science of Learning in Education](http://teachpsych.org/Resources/Documents/ebooks/asle2014.pdf) (2014). In it, authors J. A. C. Hattie and J. C. R. Yates describe what is known about the power of feedback—“average effects attributable to feedback are among the highest we know in education” (p.47)—and they offer research-based suggestions for how and when to give feedback to students.

In particular, they underscore the need for instructors to provide feedback that helps students to answer three questions:

* *Where am I going?* Effective feedback begins with clarity about the target or goal of student work. The establishment of clear short- and long-term goals is an essential first step in supporting student learning.
* *What is my level of progress?* Hattie and Yates cite recent research that showed students prefer process-oriented feedback to letter grades (Harks, Rakoczy, Besser, & Klieme, 2013). Grades may point toward overall achievement, but process-oriented feedback is more specific and immediately useful.
* *Where do I need to go next?* Feedback that guides a learner toward next steps on the pathway toward achievement of the goal is motivating and less likely to discourage forward progress than nonspecific feedback or no feedback at all.

Francis Bacon said “Knowledge is Power.” Frequent, authentic, specific feedback about progress toward goals can empower your students to improve their performance in your course. Few of us would argue that quality feedback is useful, yet classroom-based research indicates that teachers do not give as much feedback as they think they do (e.g., Ingvarson & Hattie, 2008). And when feedback is offered, it is often generic and at the group level, a type of feedback that research suggests students pay little attention to (Hattie & Gan, 2011). So it is that some types of feedback can be a powerful influence on achievement, while other types yield only minimal effect.

Explore the Hattie and Yates chapter (p. 45) in *Applying Science of Learning in Education* (2014), readily available online at [http://teachpsych.org/Resources/Documents/ebooks/asle2014.pdf](http://teachpsych.org/Resources/Documents/ebooks/asle2014.pdf%20) . The chapter concludes (p. 55*)* with nine guidelines suggesting when feedback is most effective.

*References*

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