

Embracing the 'feedback not marking' revolution: Embedding effective feedback in the classroom

A Case Study - written by Dr Liz Pyne

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Introduction

Providing feedback to students is nothing new. As teachers, we do this every day in verbal and written forms to enhance the progress of our students. However, embedding such feedback to ensure action by the students continues to be a frustration and a challenge for teachers. We know that 'Formative assessment... can raise student achievement' (William and Black, 1998 p. 3). We are aware of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) findings of 2021, that feedback offers a low-cost solution to student achievement, adding progress of six months. Enser advocates that schools are places where change happens. (Enser, 2021) Consequently, we recognised the need to support our staff and invest in a programme of change. Creating an actionable feedback culture (Hattie and Clarke, 2019) was our aim.

Implementing change: Starting small

In January 2019, we embraced our journey of 'feedback not marking', responding to the demands of teacher workload, which was too onerous and time-consuming (Gibson et al., 2015). Training sessions for teaching staff were delivered about the different types of 'feedback' but, importantly, colleagues were given autonomy to decide which pieces of work needed teacher input and were encouraged to seek alternatives, such as peer- and self-assessment. Providing this freedom was a substantial change of ethos. As we said ourselves, 'feedback is an act of love', and lesson planning was a direct consequence of giving feedback. The impact of this change was immediate; teachers felt empowered to alter to their feedback schedule with the support of the senior leadership team and without the fear of parental questions.

Step 2, 2020–22: Impact in the classroom

This change of approach had made a positive impact on the teachers, but now it needed to transfer into the classroom for the progress of the students. From September 2019, the school launched a three-year teaching and learning action plan, which centred on the work of Fletcher-Wood on responsive teaching (2020). Responsive teaching provided a whole-school impetus, allowing teacher autonomy to flourish. Additional staff training sessions were repeated with regard to giving meaningful and motivating feedback for the students, but they were also manageable for colleagues in order to respond to all.

'Responding to all' became our mantra for school improvement, allowing us to embrace the concept of feedback and response. Colleagues recognised that clear, valuable and strategic 'feedback' was vital, rather than weekly little-impact 'marking'. Importantly, colleagues had autonomy about the type of feedback that they gave. Some departments used WWW/EBI (what went well, even better if; see Wright, 2020), while others implemented FAR marking (feedback, action, response), but, significantly, colleagues were encouraging an improvement dialogue with students. Mixed with self- and peer-assessment, our students recognised the need to discuss improvements rather than looking for a 'mark' to achieve instant gratification, but with no long-term value. Due to COVID, our staff also started to develop further feedback strategies using Microsoft Teams, such as using rubrics and offering spoken feedback.

By September 2020, staff were encouraged to think about cognitive load (Sweller, 1988) when responding to our students and how chunking/retrieval could also be a form of feedback and response to support pupil progress. Fletcher-Wood (2018, p. 9) argues that 'responsive teaching blends planning and teaching, based on an understanding of how students learn from cognitive science'. Colleagues identified and understood the cognitive load of our students and appreciated the metacognitive strategies that could be utilised in the classroom. By January 2021, we reviewed our teaching and learning policy and confirmed our remit of responsive teaching for all.

Step 3, 2022–23: Creating habits

As William states, 'every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be better' (2012). This is frequently quoted by colleagues; we value their experience and seek to create expertise via professional development. The journey continued with our second three-year plan, building on responsive teaching and moving towards 'habits of success' (Fletcher-Wood, 2022). Colleagues were encouraged to sustain responsive teaching but also allow students to develop metacognitive habits for themselves. We wanted our students to respond to feedback and act instinctively. 'Teachers provide pupils with feedback all the time, but it is acting on feedback that contributes to pupil learning.' (Chiles, 2021, p. 25) Ultimately, we seek independent learners, who have self-regulation, and 'we want students to learn independently, not just follow instructions' (Fletcher-Wood, 2022, p. 3).

To develop pedagogical research, teaching colleagues were given a 'school read' (Willingham, 2021), supporting their reflection, and meeting time was allocated to focus on key themes. Training sessions were offered to provide actionable feedback and to motivate an automatic habit of response. During COVID-19 restrictions, the school had established the habit of recording all CPD sessions to allow asynchronous learning. This continued past COVID, but attendance at optional training sessions remained lower than expected. To support responsive teaching, we released class profiles to all our staff in January 2022, and they continue to be updated, giving information about the students in each class. These include support strategies and current data, which allow teaching colleagues to plan accordingly in order to respond and provide actionable feedback.

New focus for the college, 2023–24: New beginnings

With the arrival of our new headteacher in January 2023, we reassessed our current journey and created a common language of change to build on existing practices. Colleagues had improved their pedagogy (evident from non-judgmental lesson drop-ins, learning walks and sharing of good practice), but there was a need for consistency. In September 2023, a new package for change was launched. Referring to our teaching and learning policy (February 2022), we are on a journey that encompasses the past five years of professional development. The 'staff read' for 2023–24 (Sherrington, 2019) has allowed us to focus on the fundamental attributes of classroom teaching. Training sessions now follow the school-specific, spiralling mantra of instruction, feedback and response and are attended by all. Instruction has focused on lesson planning, adaptive teaching and modelling; feedback has promoted actionable feeding-forward activities; and response has encouraged staff to implement interventions, adaptations and assessment for learning. These 30-minute sessions (fortnightly) are offered as a twilight or a lunchtime slot and have proven to be accessible and popular. Our colleagues are given pedagogical ideas via teacher instruction but also, importantly, the time to reflect on their own practice and discuss ideas with colleagues about how they can make adaptive 'tweaks'. Teaching TRIOs (Bleiler-Baxter et al., 2021) have been established (departmental and across subjects) to support further discussion about classroom practice and the chance to visit colleagues' lessons. We have an increasing number of colleagues who undertake research in the classroom, undertake middle leader training and embark on master's qualifications. Our staff now discuss teaching and learning and are thinking about the 'why' (Sinek, 2011) when planning their lessons.

Conclusions

Our journey is not yet over. The desire of staff to create the most productive atmosphere for students to learn is incredible. The interest in existing pedagogy and embracing new ideas is admirable. Teaching staff have autonomy within a supportive environment, where risk-taking is valued and encouraged. Importantly, every teacher follows their own path, appropriate for their own stage of their career, but simultaneously they are encouraged to flourish via collaboration and discussion.

Next steps

Looking forward, we are aiming to continue to develop and sustain our staff's love of learning in the classroom. We are committed to ensuring that all our experienced staff become classroom experts. We are now dedicating time to head of department training; these colleagues are the cornerstone to fostering more change and development. We are reviewing our Key Stage 3 curriculum and considering the rationale behind homework. Ultimately, we are a school looking to embrace further change and be the best that we can be.

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