

AS TEACHERS WE ALSO NEED TO SEEK FEEDBACK



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Introduction

Every day we give and receive feedback from others in our daily lives; from the smile you get from a friend after listening sympathetically to a worry, to the words of gratitude from a stranger after you give up your seat on public transport.

We often find it helpful to seek feedback from others. You might choose to seek feedback from guests after hosting a dinner party that didn't go to plan. These may be friends who suggest that putting chocolate on the roast chicken wasn't a great idea, or knowledgeable others such as your Grandma who takes you through cooking the roast chicken dinner from scratch, giving you feedback and guidance as you work together, including using rosemary rather than chocolate. All of these are helpful others who will work with you as guides and external feedback sources to help you improve.

Every profession has a way for its members to assess their performance and seek feedback from another to help them to build a picture of skills, knowledge and dispositions to improve upon. In the medical profession, there's the notion of 'rounds' where the 'expert' doctor is trailed by a group of graduate doctors and they consult about a patient's diagnosis and what the treatments that are best for them, performing new procedures with someone else looking on to give them pointers. Sports are another example of the prolific use of coaches and mentors. Elite athletes work with a team to ensure they are at their peak performance, understanding that the more professionals involved in practice, the better the outcomes. They will look at it from different angles and perhaps highlight an area that the individual hasn't noticed or considered before and give advice to improve that area.

As a profession, teachers have been improving our feedback practices. My experience, early in my teaching career, was that we tended to rely on a chat in the staffroom. While this was quite friendly and helpful, I would still question myself about whether my practices were as efficient and effective as they could possibly be. Secondly, without someone actually observing me, there was always a chance

(probably quite large) that I had a blind spot when it came to my practice. This is why teachers are exploring new ways to provide feedback about classroom practice.

What is feedback and why do we need it?

Effective feedback is defined as information that is designed to improve achievement and leads to changes in behaviour and is usually related to a goal (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2019). Feedback can be gained in different ways and from different sources. Professional feedback must be based on evidence.

As a teacher, I regularly gather evidence on my students' skills and understanding in different subjects. Sometimes this evidence is via a test but at other times it is notes of my observations about behaviours when students are reading. When I am coaching teachers, I take notes on my observations of what the teacher or students are doing in the classroom and discuss with the teacher areas that they felt they needed to work on. All of this evidence became information to work with to identify areas for improvement.

There is plenty of research and examples of how giving students quality feedback helps them to move forward in their learning, so why not teachers? We now operate in school environments that encourage collaboration and cooperative learning to improve our practice. Hattie and Timperley's model of feedback (2007) is just as relevant for adult learning as it is for students. Effective feedback answers three questions:

Feed Up: Where am I going?

Feed Back: How am I going?

Feed Forward: Where to next?

As teachers, we need to consider these elements of feedback for our own practice. Without feedback, practice of skills and knowledge makes the practice permanent. Professor Anders Ericsson has studied the area of peak performance and has gained insight into how we gain expertise in a variety of professions. He uses the term 'deliberate practice' and it involves continuing with your regular work 'the practice' and receiving feedback from others and yourself on the performance (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

In my school, we implemented a new practice of a daily language bootcamp. This session was supposed to last for fifteen minutes and covered elements of language including handwriting, spelling and language conventions. As this was a new way of working for me, I would regularly go over the allotted fifteen minutes and I had noticed that not all students were engaging fully. I asked another colleague to observe this part of the lesson and received feedback on my timing (too much time spent in explanation) and engagement (some students were regularly missing resources such as pencils). I also checked in with students and asked them about ways that I could improve these sessions. Some gave me the feedback that the regular changes in the activity meant that they often felt confused about what was coming next. With this feedback, I was able to immediately change my practice to make my explanations more concise and put in place routines to assist students to follow the lesson and be prepared. Without this feedback, I would have perhaps addressed one of these issues but certainly not all of them.

Evidence-based feedback: The role of observation

Good feedback is based on information that is evidence-based and helps you to improve your practice. There are a variety of ways that this is done in schools. The evidence gathering aspect of the process might be done by other teachers, students or even using a video to capture and reflect on your own practice. According to the Department of Education and Training peer observation guidelines (DET 2019), this process should focus on your individual needs as a teacher and promote improved student outcomes as a result of the feedback.

Individual needs

Each one of us is different with strengths and areas for improvement. We all come to teaching with different experiences which have enhanced different skills. With this in mind, it makes sense that our own development opportunities should be individualised. Feedback is one way that allows us to improve our own practice with the expert guidance of another, or through our own reflections which can act as a way of giving ourselves feedback.

Opportunity to act

Getting feedback can be an opportunity to develop your practice only if you take action on the feedback. For example, I was once working with a colleague who gave me some feedback about the focus teaching component within my maths class. I would give an explanation of the topic and then continue to give examples until I felt sure all students had understood the concept. I would then explain the activity to them, and then set them to do the activity. Sometimes this component could run to thirty or forty minutes of the allotted hour and yet I would still need to repeat the activity instructions to individual students. Using the feedback from a colleague who had been working with me in the classroom I came to realise that this was too long for students to be listening. I took action by mentally rehearsing what I was going to say about the concept. This made me be very clear about what the key points would be. I then set a timer for myself to limit my focus teaching to 10 minutes. I explained to the students why I was using the timer and asked a monitor to be responsible for setting it. The outcome for students was so much better. They received concise instructions and then had more time to practice the concept and skills themselves while I was able to give small group and individual help to those who needed more support. The key to this was I had an opportunity to act upon the feedback rather than waiting until the next time the topic came around. ([For another perspective on this, see 'The Sorenson Ratio' in Edition 5](#))

Agreed Criteria

Teaching is both an art and a science according to Marzano (2007). Effective teaching should be practice that is based on research, however, knowing when to apply those strategies is the art. With this in mind, agreed criteria for giving and receiving feedback is a must; agreed criteria means defining the parameters around the feedback that is given.

For example, if you identified that you would like to improve on your questioning techniques, you may ask another person to observe a section of your lesson where you are asking questions or video the section for you to watch after the lesson. No doubt there will be many other things happening in the classroom during this period including students moving about the class or working in groups or independently and time explaining the concept or task. Without agreed criteria, the observer (or

yourself) may be distracted by the other things happening and give feedback on those, instead of, or as well as, the focus of questioning.

Questions that I might ask the teacher being observed:

- What area are you working on developing?
- What would you like me to look for?
- Which section or part of the lesson would you like me to observe?
- Are there any key actions that you would like me to observe?

There are a variety of different frameworks that you can use as criteria including the [Victorian Teaching and Learning model](#) (DET, 2018c) which encompasses the [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#) (DET, 2017), [Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning](#) (DET, 2018b), the [pedagogical model](#) (DET, 2018a) and also the [DET Peer Observation Guidelines](#) (DET 2018d)

Conclusion

Even with the best of intentions, giving and receiving feedback can be challenging. There can be opportunities for miscommunication or misunderstanding. I've found that the best way to approach feedback is with an open mind and developing trust with others. I always made sure that any written observation notes were given to the person being observed and that we had a conversation about what we wanted observed before the session to ensure the feedback was targeted.

As a professional, feedback is important in continuing to improve your practice. All professions engage in observation and feedback and research has proven that this deliberate practice is key to developing and maintaining expertise.

Key takeaways

- When asking for feedback, be specific about the area that you would like to focus on.
- Use the criteria that is utilised in your school to help build your understanding of teaching practice. A common language about practice is key to feedback.
- Don't be afraid to ask for feedback from students. Set up the parameters and let them know when you act upon it.

Discussion with your mentor

Discuss with your mentor the protocols in your school for teacher observation and feedback. If there aren't any specific observation structures in place, plan together for how you could make this happen.

Ask your mentor:

- How do you currently get helpful feedback on your teaching practice?
- In what ways can you involve other teachers, students or technology to increase the opportunities to receive feedback?

Further Reading

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