2 FEEDBACK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE LEARNER

In Chapter 1, we presented a "recipe" for providing feedback to students. Our purpose there was to give you an overall idea of what we are talking about in terms of teachers presenting feedback to students. In this chapter, we take a somewhat different approach. We look at feedback from the perspective of the learner—the recipient of the feedback. We've all been there. We were all students once, and we are all still learners today in many aspects of life. In this chapter, we will leave "the front of the class" and move to the students' seats to get a very different perspective on feedback. In doing so, we will look at a model of feedback that we proposed and recently revised that looks at the processes underlying feedback.

SETTING THE SCENE

Let's set the scene. Throughout this explanation of the model, we will shift back and forth between this scenario and an explanation of the model. We'll put the scenario in italics to make the transitions easier.

You are a seventh-grade student, and you have handed in a report on the Jamestown Colony that was settled in Virginia in the early 1600s. You were allowed to choose your topic for this assignment, and you were asked to provide a summary of your topic and what it might have been like to be a 12-year-old in that time and place. You were told that your grade would be based 40% on the accuracy and completeness of the details about your topic, 30% on how well you described being a young person in that setting, and 30% on writing style, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. You worked pretty hard on the report and believe you did a good job—maybe not great as you ran short of time at the end, but somewhere between good and very good. It's been a week since you handed the paper in, and the teacher is walking around the classroom, handing the reports back.

A MODEL OF RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTIONAL FEEDBACK

Figure 2.1 presents a model of how students receive and respond to instructional feedback. We'll use that as a basis for looking at feedback from the student's perspective.

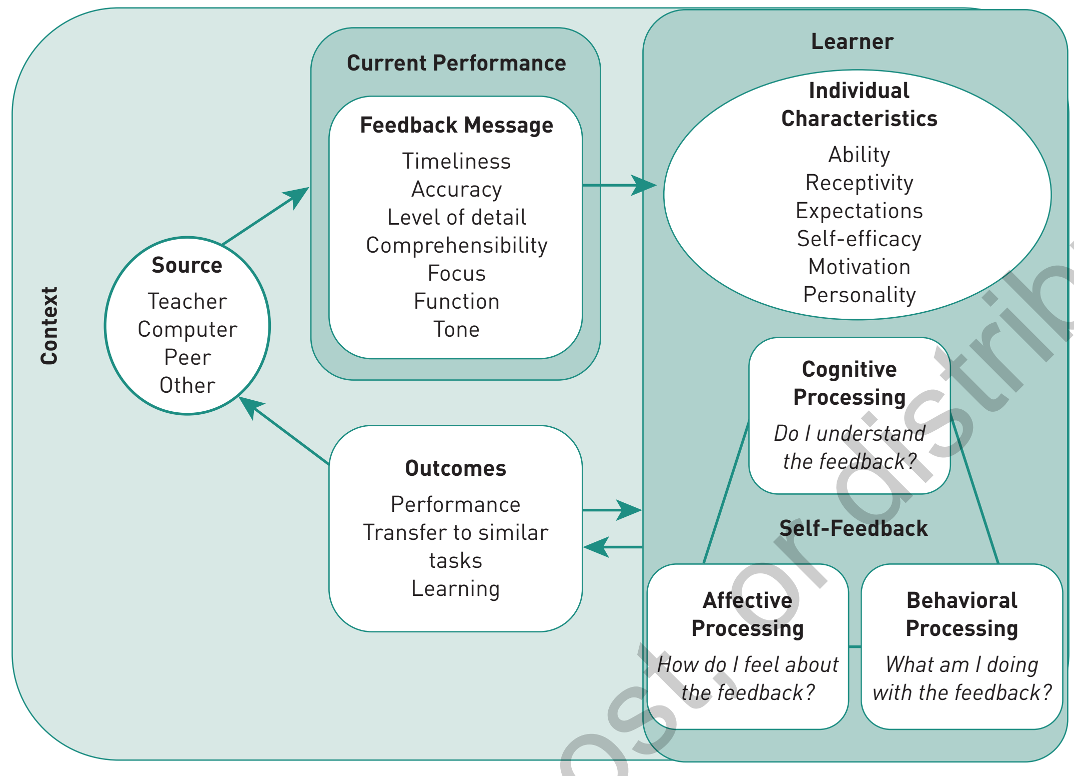
The Context

Instruction happens in a context, and we define *context* very broadly. It may be culture, an academic domain, or an academic versus nonacademic setting—all of these would have an important influence over the entire student feedback process. For example, hearing

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

FIGURE 2.1 ■ A Student Feedback Interaction Model



Source: Lipnevich and Smith (2022).

The "feedback culture" in the school also contextualizes the interactions of students with feedback.

"You can do so much better!" from your swimming coach will be perceived very differently compared to the exact same comment from your math teacher one day before you take a college entrance exam. The "feedback culture" in the school also contextualizes the interactions of students with feedback.

If students expect feedback, understand its purpose and value, and possess a set of tools that allow them to process it, the benefit (or the power!) of feedback will be so much greater.

The Source of the Feedback

The actual chain begins with the source of the feedback and the student's current performance. Let's start with the source, which in this case is your teacher. But the feedback could be coming from a computer, a peer, or perhaps the activity itself (if, for example, you are shooting an arrow or baking a cake). For most students, the teacher is a trusted source of instructional feedback, and usually a person with whom the student has a positive relationship. That relationship, and the trust that the student has in the teacher, is a key factor in the receipt and processing of feedback. Combined with beliefs in the nature and the quality of the task or assessment that is generating the feedback, the student's relationship with and trust in the teacher determines how the student will react to the feedback.

The student's relationship with and trust in the teacher determines how the student will react to the feedback.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Thus, the student has expectations, as well as an emotional anticipation. If the feedback received is consonant with the student's expectations, it will be welcomed. On the other hand, if the feedback is completely at odds with what the student is expecting, it can lead to a strong, negative emotional response, and perhaps a rejection of the feedback message.

Returning to our scenario, you have expectations and emotions concerning what you are about to receive. You might think that this will go well, and that you trust your teacher to "be on your side," and therefore you are eagerly awaiting the feedback. But maybe it is early in the school year, and this is the first assessment being handed back to you by this teacher. You like the teacher and believe he is fair, but you have no idea how he generates feedback.

This might cause some anxiety over what you are about to receive. Or perhaps you've already had a bad experience (in your view), and you have a substantial amount of anxiety as your teacher approaches your desk.

Source: istock.com/SeventyFour

Another potential source of feedback is peers. Peers can be involved in feedback, but as teachers, we are often reluctant to use this resource. Peer feedback has the potential of benefiting both the recipient and the provider.

Here, we should keep in mind that students need explicit guidelines on how to deliver feedback. We recommend offering students key words or phrases, such as "Can you tell me more about this?" or "I really like how you approached . . ." or "Let's think together about how to develop . . ." Similarly, clarifying goals and purposes of peer feedback activity will make it easier for students to accept comments from a peer. To go back to the context, this all is premised on a comfortable classroom atmosphere where learners are expected to help each other grow.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

The Feedback Message

And now we move to the feedback message itself. What did the teacher say? How did the teacher say it? Was it presented in a timely fashion (for some tasks)? What was it about? Is it understandable? Did it say what to do next? It is truly remarkable how much feedback messages can vary from one teacher to another, from one assignment to another, and from one student to another. In our model, we list out timeliness, level of detail, comprehensibility, accuracy, tone, focus, and function as ways that feedback can vary. Let's explore those for a minute. With regard to timeliness, there are domains in which feedback should be presented as soon after the work is completed as possible. Take music or sports, for example. The feedback here has to be immediate in order to have its effect. It wouldn't make sense to say, "Evan, remember last week you didn't lift your right elbow enough when doing your taekwondo form?" The student needs to have this information immediately. On the other hand, when students are working on an essay or science project, receiving delayed feedback doesn't seem to affect outcomes much, studies show (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Moreover, as we alluded to in Chapter 1, studies now show that interleaving is an excellent way to learn (Brown et al., 2014). So, especially with assignments that are longer and take more time for the students to work on, don't worry if you can't deliver students' papers at the next class meeting. Sometimes you will have to say, "Listen, folks, I will have these back to you after the Thanksgiving break." At the same time, don't overdo it either. You don't want your students to forget what the assignment was about.

Peer feedback has the potential of benefiting both the recipient and the provider.

In music, feedback is often immediate. Here, a teacher is reminding the young performer how to hold the instrument.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

Next we consider level of detail in the feedback. As we mentioned, we have to think about how detailed we are going to get with the feedback. In most cases, a good rule of thumb for this is that feedback should be proportional to the amount of effort the students put into the assignments.

That is not to say that you should write as much as the student did (!), but rather to point out that lengthier, more detailed assignments will call for more feedback from you than shorter ones.

Feedback should be proportional to the amount of effort the students put into the assignments.

The focus of the feedback is critical. It should be directly related to what you said the assignment was about—the rubric or the details provided in the description of the task. If this is a history assignment (as in our example), the feedback should primarily be about history and the goals of the lesson and not focus too much on spelling or grammar. One really important aspect of the feedback message is to not lose sight of the big picture and focus too much on details. Keep in mind that we are constantly on a quest to not overburden students' cognitive resources. If we do, our feedback will fail.

Feedback needs to be understood by the student, so it is important to consider how you are phrasing your comments and the level of vocabulary you use. Consider the students' level of expertise and prior knowledge and, if possible, vary your feedback by students. If you have a student with a lower level of language proficiency, maybe go lighter on bigger words and don't use as many. Feedback also needs to be accurate. This can be a real challenge at times, especially when you want to be encouraging but it is really hard to find a whole lot that went right in an assignment.

A HOT TAKE ON SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding is a process of removing some of the complexity of a task so that the learner can focus more on the basics. In normal language, we call that "lending a hand." Often, when talking about scaffolding, we use an example of running alongside a person learning to ride a bike and holding the seat so that the bike doesn't fall over before the rider can get "up to speed" and get a sense of balance that comes with that higher speed. Then the "helper" gradually lets go of the bike seat (often without telling the rider). This removal of the support is "fading" and is based on feedback on the learner's progress. Scaffolding is usually attributed to Belarusian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Puntambekar, 2022) although Maria Montessori (1949/2007) wrote about similar ideas prior to Vygotsky, as did Jerome Bruner (1961).

One of your authors encountered a great example of scaffolding a few years ago while taking a glassblowing class. As shown in the picture, you typically work on glass without gloves. The glass, at the end of a long rod, is somewhere around 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. You have to roll the rod back and forth to keep the glass from falling off the rod in a lump. This is a version of rubbing your tummy and patting your head at the same time. The only difference is a pound of molten glass millimeters away from your unprotected fingers.

(Continued)

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

(Continued)

To help out as you are beginning to learn how to do this, the instructor takes charge of rolling the rod. He does it completely at first, then has you just place your left hand on the rod to get the feeling of it, then has you do so with more pressure, and finally removes his hand so you are doing it yourself. The picture shows the moment when he has released the rod.

What he has to do as a teacher is to track your progress on this technique and determine just how much support he needs to provide at all times. Feedback!

That glass is around 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. No gloves!

This brings us to three really critical aspects of feedback: the focus, function, and tone of the feedback. Let's start with focus. What message is being sent to the student? What is the student being asked to concentrate on? Is the feedback essentially corrective in nature? Does it basically edit the student's work? Or does it suggest that there are errors to be found there and that the student should find them? The function relates to whether the feedback is primarily concerned with the current assignment, whether it is more forward-looking ("On your next essay, see if you can . . ."), or whether the sole purpose of the message is to motivate the student without focusing much on the content. The term *feedforward*

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

has become popular in educational circles today, and although your authors are not particularly fond of neologisms, we've pretty much made our peace with this one. So the question here is whether you are more focused on the current work or where the student is headed in the future. Finally, there is the tone of the feedback. Is it fundamentally positive? Is it personal? Does it acknowledge past efforts and look forward to future ones? We deal with all these issues more extensively in Chapter 3, but it is worthwhile to consider them as we look at feedback from the student's perspective.

You receive your paper, and the first thing you notice is that there is no grade on it. Instead, it begins with a note written to you: "Maria, I found your report fascinating; I learned some things about Jamestown that I did not know, and I enjoyed reading about your ideas of what it would have been like to be a 12-year-old girl in Jamestown during the early 1600s. Here is where I'd like to see you go next on this assignment . . ." Your first reaction is maybe one of relief; Mr. Jackson liked your work. And the next emotion might be one of a bit of excitement: This is good, and it's not over. There is more work that you can do to make this better. Where might this be going? You take a quick flip through the remaining pages and see that Mr. Jackson has written you a number of smaller suggestions, and that there is little by way of editorial and grammatical corrections. You are feeling like you have a partner, an advisor, on your report. And you aren't really as focused on a grade as you were when Mr. Jackson was walking around the classroom, handing back the papers.

The Learners and Their Actions

Feedback is only effective if it is used. Feedback is only effective if it is used. (Yes, we said that twice. It's that important.) We now turn to the learner directly. Learners are different—from one another, from one subject area to the next, and from themselves at different points in time. They differ in their achievement levels with regard to the assessment at hand, in their overall receptivity to getting feedback, in their sense of self-efficacy and motivation, and in their expectations for the feedback they are about to receive. If you are teaching 22 children in an elementary school, you have a different set of circumstances than if you are teaching 112 in a high school. Elementary school teachers typically know their students on a more personal level than high school teachers (just due to sheer numbers and the amount of time interacting with them). This allows for more personalization of feedback messages and greater consideration of the factors just mentioned. But whatever the level of personalization, and no matter the number of students, what we want to see with regard to feedback is the student engaging with it.

*We call these the ABCs of processing—*affective, behavioral, cognitive*—and encourage all feedback providers to consider them when crafting their feedback messages.*

So now we turn to the learner directly. The feedback has been received, and it has to be processed by the learner: cognitively (making sense of it, understanding it), affectively (processing emotions elicited to the feedback received), and behaviorally (executing a plan of action based on the feedback). We call these the ABCs of processing—*affective*, *behavioral*, *cognitive*—and encourage all feedback providers to consider them when crafting their feedback messages.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

How will the student feel, think, and behave in response to what you are saying? It may change the way you approach the feedback.

Let us imagine a situation where the feedback allows for continued work on the assessment, is informative about what to do next, and is respectful of each student's current efforts on the task. What then? Well, the learners (students) first need to understand what has been said. They need to be able to cognitively process the feedback. As they do that, they react to it from an emotional (affective) perspective. How do they feel about it? Does it match their expectations? If not, what do they do then? Do they reject the feedback or change their own assessment of their work? And after they have processed the information both cognitively and affectively, they must take a course of action with regard to working on it—that is, employ behavioral strategies.

The opportunity and motivation to revise are critical to students' use of feedback.

If it will not be handed in again, then there may be little motivation to work on it. On the other hand, if no grade has been assigned yet, and if it will be considered by the teacher again, then the motivation to work on it may be strong. In other words, the opportunity and motivation to revise are critical to students' use of feedback.

As you go through your work, you see: "Maria, I had a bit of difficulty on this part of the report. It is, well, a little bit 'clunky' if you know what I mean. It doesn't read smoothly like what precedes and follows this section. Maybe try focusing on what comes just before this and just after, and see if you can make it flow better." Now, do you agree with that or not? How do you feel about it? It clearly is what Mr. Jackson would like to see you work on, and you don't have a grade yet, so maybe it's a good idea to reread this section and see if you understand what he means and how you can improve it. Should you go talk to him about it or try to handle this all on your own? What else has he recommended you do on the report? How much time can you devote to this?

Outcomes

This is an aspect of the feedback process that is often overlooked. What do we get out of providing feedback? What do we want to get out of it? What does the student want to get out of it? It might be useful here to compare feedback in classrooms to feedback in sports coaching. On a report, if a student gets feedback, it can often just be viewed as "Well, this is what the teacher had to say about what I did." But on an athletic field (or in a music lesson), the feedback is specifically geared toward improvement. The learner knows that, and the coach knows that. There is a notion not of trying to improve the thing that is now over (the previous free throw attempt, the last singing of that passage of the song, etc.), but rather of how to make the next version better. For many things in sports, the event doesn't change. It's always about throwing the discus or making the free throw. But in the classroom, what is the equivalent of that? What do we (both the teacher and the student) want to see improve: the report itself, or the ability to do the report? This is sometimes referred to as the difference between *performance* (the current report, product, etc.) and *learning* (the knowledge and skills that can be taken on to the next activity), and it is an important difference, especially for considering how to provide feedback. Occasionally we are actually more interested in the current performance (maybe practicing a speech

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

or working on a piece of art), but much more often we are looking to the future and are concerned about long-term learning.

It is a truism of schooling that students are often more interested in what grade they are going to receive than anything else, and we devote a whole chapter to grades as feedback later on, but we need to think about how the students view the additional work we would like them to do on this task. It has often been said that grades are the pay that teachers hand out for the work that they want students to do. This seems a bit harsh to us, but it is important to take the students' perspective in asking them to work on something, especially to take a second attempt at it. As educational researcher Jere Brophy once said, "Some kids will only work for grades, some because they like what they are doing and others to improve, but a lot of kids will just do the work because they buy into the notion of school. They aren't sure what they are getting in return, but they are willing to go along with the system" (Brophy, personal communication, 2007).

Having received the feedback from Mr. Jackson, you are now faced with the notion of what you want to get out of this assessment. How much more work should you put into it? What are your goals for this assessment at this point? Are the questions you are asking yourself more along the lines of "How can I make this as good as it can be?" or "How can I learn from this in order to make my next assessment better on the first draft?" or "How can I get the highest grade (perhaps combined with the least amount of work)?" Part of what you are thinking about might have to do with your relationship with Mr. Jackson. Do you want to show him what you can do, or is it good enough to just get by and be done with this assignment?

Take a long-term perspective on feedback and have it be an ongoing conversation with the students about their progress.

If, as a teacher, your primary concern with regard to outcomes is learning—improvement on the next task—then what can you do in terms of feedback to motivate the students toward that outcome? In part, we would argue that the key here is to take a long-term perspective on feedback and have it be an ongoing conversation with the students about their progress.

That would include noting progress as you see it and pointing to specific areas of growth you'd like to see in subsequent work. Furthermore, teachers may provide feedback on more general skills and dispositions and thus attempt to work on a broader notion of growth in their students. Time management, study strategies, teamwork—they all require feedback from the teacher in order to improve, and this feedback can be delivered along with the comments on the task or separately.

SUMMARY AND TAKEAWAYS

In this chapter, we looked at the complex interplay of student feedback components and turned the focus on feedback to the students' perspective: How do they understand the feedback messages they receive, how do they feel about them, and how do they choose to act on them? Taking that perspective has highlighted the fact that the nature of the message is critical with respect to how it is received and acted upon. Also critical is the nature of the relationship between the student and the teacher. Does the student believe that the teacher is "on their side" in this journey? The belief that the teacher is more an advocate than a judge is critical to a strong teaching and feedback-providing relationship.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How can you "take the student perspective" in providing feedback?
2. How can you ensure that your students will read your feedback, work on that feedback, and apply it on their next assessment?
3. How can you be certain that your students always understand what you are trying to say in your feedback?
4. How beneficial might it be to think about what you are going to say to students in their feedback *before* you develop the assessment or assignment that is going to generate that feedback?
5. Have you considered the ABCs of processing?

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Copyright ©2023 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.