

Providing Effective Formative Feedback

Brandi Graham

Abstract

Formative feedback is considered by many to be an effective technique for improving student performance on a variety of academic tasks. While formative feedback can be a useful teaching tool, there are specific requirements that must be met in order for it to be used effectively by students. In order to provide effective feedback, educators need to understand the characteristics of effective feedback. In addition, teachers must also understand the obstacles to providing feedback and possible solutions that can be used to enhance student learning.

Educators are constantly searching for ways to improve student performance related to course objectives or outcomes. One of the ways that teachers can help students progress in their learning is through the use of formative assessment. While there are a variety of definitions, formative assessment can be viewed as “ungraded testing used before or during instruction to aid in planning and diagnosis” (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2006, p. 538). This simple definition belies the complex nature of formative assessment and its many applications in a classroom. While there are many methods of providing formative feedback to students, educators must be cognizant of the fact that simply providing feedback is not enough to improve learning; formative feedback must meet several requirements in order to be considered effective. In order to provide effective formative feedback, educators must understand the characteristics of high-quality feedback, identify issues that prevent feedback from being used, and find ways to provide feedback that will engage students in their learning.

Characteristics of Effective Feedback

While there are varying opinions on the characteristics of effective feedback, several traits are mentioned repeatedly in research: the best formative feedback will meet the needs of each individual student, motivate the student to do well, be usable by the student, relate clearly to outcomes or criteria, and be delivered in a timely fashion (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010; Poulos & Mahoney, 2008). In order to be effective, feedback must be tailored to the needs of each student. When individual differences are valued and students are encouraged to express their ideas, they will gain confidence and help each other learn (Clark, 2011). Acknowledging differences is important in classrooms today, where teachers encounter students with diverse backgrounds and a variety of life experiences. Effective feedback must also motivate students to improve their work. Educators must carefully consider the feelings and self-perceptions of each student before providing feedback, as these factors can have a significant effect on how feedback is perceived and used (Eva et al., 2012). Formative feedback is not helpful if a student has negative feelings related to being assessed, and students will sometimes become defensive when errors in their work are pointed out. Instructors need to provide feedback in a way that will be received positively by students. Providing personalized feedback and ensuring that feedback will motivate students to do better are closely related, since they both require educators to know students on an individual basis.

In addition to considering the needs of individual students, teachers must also provide feedback that is usable, related to outcomes, and timely (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010; Poulos & Mahoney, 2008). Effective feedback must be usable by the learner, and enable the learner to make progress toward a desired outcome. Teachers must provide feedback that clearly explains to students how to improve their work in order to meet the criteria (Davies, 2011). Providing specific feedback to students gives them information that they can act on to improve their work and meet the identified outcomes. Additionally, effective feedback should be

clearly tied to criteria or outcomes. Students themselves will state that feedback needs to be directly related to the criteria that will be assessed for a particular assignment (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Providing students with the criteria enables the learners to understand exactly what they need to do in order to perform well on the assigned task. Finally, feedback must be delivered in a timely manner, in order to have a significant impact on learning. If feedback is not given in time, students cannot use it effectively (Huxham, 2007). The sooner students receive feedback, the sooner they can identify errors in their learning and take steps to correct them. As a result, students can learn more efficiently. Teachers must address each characteristic of formative feedback if the feedback is to be effective and enhance student learning.

Issues and Possible Solutions

Several obstacles can prevent students from using formative feedback and learning from it: lack of personalization, lack of motivation, inability to understand the feedback, vagueness, and feedback that is provided too late. One issue that prevents students from using feedback is a lack of personalization. The best feedback is constantly changing in order to meet the needs of each learner (Clark, 2011). Each student comes to class with a unique personal experience, and these personal differences need to be acknowledged by the teacher: a “one-size-fits-all” approach to formative assessment will not be effective. In discussing the role of teachers and students, Schartel (2012) used the analogy of a coach and an athlete: in order to perform at the optimum level, the athlete needs to receive feedback from the coach and then use it to meet a desired outcome (p. 86). Approaching the student/teacher relationship in this manner is helpful because the relationship between a coach and athlete is a personal one: the coach knows the athlete’s specific strengths and weaknesses, while the athlete trusts the coach to give reliable feedback that will enhance performance. In a classroom, the students will see that teachers are aware of their deficiencies and that steps can be taken to correct them by using an individualized approach. Educators must acknowledge the individual experiences and skills of their students in order to provide personalized feedback that will optimize student learning.

Another issue related to formative feedback is the fact that in some situations, students are not motivated to use feedback. When a student is given a grade and feedback on an assignment, there are instances when the student is satisfied with the mark that was given, and does not make an effort to improve the assignment (Weimer, 2014). Lack of motivation is an issue that educators deal with regularly: students will receive suggestions on how to meet the criteria for an assignment, but they do not use the comments since they feel that the mark they received is “good enough.” One possible solution to this issue is to provide only comments on assignments, with no numerical grade (Denton, Madden, Roberts, & Rowe, 2008; Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin, & Thorpe, 2011). If a grade is not provided, students are more likely to engage with the feedback provided to make the necessary changes to their work. Specific feedback is a helpful strategy when students can be given suggestions regarding how to improve individual outcomes related to a larger assignment, instead of an overall score. As students improve on the individual outcomes, the overall quality of the assignment improves. Separating feedback from grades is one effective way for educators to motivate students to use formative feedback.

While not providing grades may help students to improve their work, another problem still exists: certain types of feedback can actually de-motivate students. Some students view criticism of their work as a personal criticism, which can affect their feelings; therefore, educators must ensure that feedback is worded in a way that does not reduce student motivation (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). It is also important to note that students have a “psychological immune system,” which means that they will protect their self-concepts by avoiding or ignoring feedback that will generate negative emotions (Eva et al., 2012). Students will sometimes take criticism of their work personally, especially in the writing assignments that are typical of an ELA classroom. As a result, teachers must be aware of the type of feedback

being provided and how the feedback might be construed by the students. The feedback must be constructive and phrased in a way that does not reduce student motivation. Understanding how students perceive feedback and their feelings about it are key factors to consider when providing commentary on how to improve assignments. Motivating students to use feedback requires educators to know their students on a personal level and provide them with criticism that will be used to improve specific assignments.

Even when teachers provide feedback that meets the needs of the students as individuals, students must use the feedback that was provided to improve their work. There are times when students are not able to use feedback because they do not understand it and therefore cannot apply it to their assignments (Sadler, 2010). Educators often make assumptions about how much background knowledge students have, and it is expected that students will understand the comments or criticism that is provided to them; however, this is often not the case. Even after providing written feedback on an assignment, it is sometimes necessary to explain the feedback in more detail to some students. An effective way to enhance student understanding of formative feedback is to provide explicit instruction on feedback practices, such as showing students exemplars and teaching students key vocabulary related to assessment (Sadler, 2010). If students are expected to write an essay, it is helpful to have a sample essay that they can refer to. It is also important that students understand the different parts of essay and the vocabulary associated with that type of writing. When students have background knowledge related to assessment and can understand the language of assessment, they are more likely to use feedback in order to improve their work.

Another advantage related to teaching students about formative assessment is that students can start to assess their own work and that of their peers. Once students understand what a high-quality assignment looks like, they can peer-assess the work of their classmates and self-assess their own work, using strategies such as reflection and checking for evidence of criteria being met (Davies, 2011; Gregory, Cameron, & Davies, 2011). When students assess their own work or that of their peers, they become more engaged in their learning since they are thinking about the work and checking it against criteria. Specifically teaching students about feedback and how to interpret it is vital to enhancing their understanding of feedback and their ability to use it in an effective manner. It also motivates students to think critically about their own work and that of their peers. Getting students involved in the assessment process encourages them to engage in a meaningful way with the feedback provided, and their understanding of feedback will improve as a result.

Ensuring that feedback is clearly related to criteria or outcomes is another critical characteristic of effective formative feedback. Developing clear criteria for assignments and providing comments related to those criteria enable an educator to provide specific instructions to students about how to improve their work. Students themselves have indicated that specific feedback is of more value to them than general comments or a high score (Liu & Lee, 2013). Students are willing to use feedback if it is specific enough to act on and they can see how changes in their work will enhance the final product. For example, if a student is developing a response to a novel and is told that a response is too vague, that individual may not understand how to improve the response. However, if a student is told to include evidence from the novel to support his/her ideas in several specific areas because one criterion of the assignment is using outside information to support an opinion, that student has a better understanding of how to improve the response. Showing students the criteria that will be assessed, and giving specific instructions about how to meet those criteria, are key steps in getting students to use feedback in order to meet specific outcomes.

Another way to show students how to meet criteria is through the use of exemplars. Model answers are one way to show students what the expectations are for a particular assignment; these answers should be developed by the teacher and demonstrate what "ideal responses" look like (Huxham, 2007, p. 603). Exemplars are suitable for assignments such as responses or other short pieces of writing. Students can model their own work after the exemplars, since the

exemplars demonstrate a high-level response. Examples of work that would receive a lower grade could also be used. Students can then look at these examples and suggest ways to improve the response so that it will meet the criteria that were established. Giving examples of work that meets specific criteria will help students to appraise their own work and think about how to improve it in order to meet the standards that have been established.

While feedback must be personalized, motivational, usable, and connected to criteria, all of these characteristics are negated if the last requirement of effective feedback is not met: feedback must be delivered in a timely manner. If students have already completed an assignment by the time formative feedback is given, they have lost the opportunity to use the feedback and make improvements to their work. One way to overcome this problem is the use of technology: when technology is used to provide feedback, the time that it takes to provide feedback can be reduced when compared to written comments on assignments (Denton et al., 2008). In an ELA classroom, there can be a significant number of assignments to evaluate in a short period of time, so any method that enables teachers to become more efficient is helpful. Technology may increase efficiency because teachers can develop feedback reports from comment banks (Denton et al., 2008). Since teachers need only to select a comment for a particular student instead of transcribing it onto assignments, the time required to provide each individual comment will be reduced. The use of technology has the potential increase the speed at which teachers can provide feedback to their students.

Conclusion

Providing effective formative feedback is a process that requires a considerable amount of work on the part of educators. Therefore, it is vital to understand the characteristics of effective feedback so that the effort put forth by instructors is worthwhile and helpful for students. While there are a number of obstacles to providing effective feedback, educators can use a variety of techniques to ensure that students are engaging with the feedback provided and using it to progress in their learning. Formatively assessing student work in an effective manner requires teachers to understand both their students and the nature of the feedback itself. Teachers must know and understand their students in terms of their skills, abilities, and emotions. Additionally, educators must recognize the characteristics of the feedback itself that makes it useful: the feedback must be understandable, related to outcomes, and delivered as promptly as possible. When all of these requirements are met, educators are able to provide students with the tools that they need to meet the outcomes for their assignments and become successful learners.

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About the Author

Brandi Graham is currently enrolled in the Master of Education program at Brandon University in the field of education administration. She teaches grades 9-12 English Language Arts at the Dauphin Regional Comprehensive Secondary School in the Mountain View School Division.