

Actionable Feedback for Teachers: The Missing Element in School Improvement

- Kevin Feldman, 2016

Problem

How many times in the past month have you been solicited for feedback (restaurants, rental cars, airlines, dentist etc)? For most of us the answer is countless times which begs the question - why? What is all the fuss about feedback? It is absolutely clear in virtually all domains of human endeavor that useful or “actionable” feedback is a critical attribute in learning and continuous improvement. Research (*Visible Learning*, Hattie, 2009) indicates a key factor in changing/improving complex human skills such as teaching is “actionable performance feedback” (effect size of .79) From sports, to the arts, to business we devote untold time and creative energy to figuring out how to provide useful productive feedback thus improving performance... but how about in our schools?...the very institutions dedicated to human learning... how much useful feedback do teachers receive? Regrettably, for the vast majority of teachers meaningful feedback is limited at best (www.metproject.org), consisting largely of ritualized annual personnel evaluations that do not reliably lead to improved teaching and learning.

Solution

Fortunately a number of schools across the country are beginning to address the paucity of actionable instructional feedback in a variety of creative ways producing impressive gains in both teacher satisfaction and student achievement. While there is no single best structure or process for providing meaningful feedback to teachers I have found that utilizing a range of structures provides schools with the necessary choices and autonomy to create this “collaborative culture” in which feedback is valued, desired, sought out, and put to productive use. These structures include but are not limited to:

- 1) Learning Walks (LW) – groups of 4-8 teachers observe their peers for 20 min, taking notes using a observation form tied to research supported focus area(s) (e.g. IES Practice Guides). Richard Elmore et al calls this team observational coaching process “Instructional Rounds” (*Instructional Rounds in Education* 2009, City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel).
- 2) Peer to Peer – teachers choose a learning partner within or across their grade/content area and observe for 20-30 min. using the same LW observation form. Informal feedback plus PLC (Professional Learning Community) conversations are now grounded in concrete experience.
- 3) Video feedback – beginning by watching the videos of other teachers (e.g. teachingchannel.org, explicitinstruction.org), moving to self observation to sharing videos with trusted partners and beyond. (see: *Focus on Teaching: Using Video for High Impact Instruction* by Jim Knight 2014)
- 4) Expert coaching – district and/or school based coaches provide observation and feedback as well as covering the classroom so a teacher can observe a particularly skilled colleague focused on an area of professional need.
- 5) Principal Walk Through brief observation – usually 5-10 min. – helpful to have small 3x5 cards w/NCR to leave a copy of 2-3 specific pieces of actionable feedback.
- 6) Co-planning – working in PLC or grade level teams teachers plan specific lessons together based on incorporating key strategies/practices tied to feedback they have received to improve instruction. Collect formative student assessment data for later PLC discussions/de-briefing and further refinement.
- 7) Interview/survey students – this can take many forms, a number of research validated tools have been developed that give students a “voice” in the school improvement project (<http://tripoded.com/school-leaders/>). I have found de-briefing with students after Learning Walk observations to be very revealing/rewarding. Students are amazingly articulate about what types of instructional practices help them learn difficult material.

I have found that Learning Walk teams are an excellent way to begin the teacher feedback process since there is a feeling of “safety in numbers – “we are all in this together” and it allows a significant number of teachers to have a shared experience of the power of actionable feedback in which they both give and receive instructional feedback. I am still amazed by the number of teachers who tell me, “Student teaching aside, I’ve been teaching high school math for 12 years and this is the very first time I’ve actually seen a colleague teach!” For a more detailed narrative describing how these feedback practices have impacted K-12 schools in Lansing MI see: <http://edublog.scholastic.com/post/how-learning-walks-have-renewed-passions-teaching-my-district> .

Shared Instructional Focus/Framework

The Measures of Effective Teaching Project (www.metproject.org) notes that “...classroom observations hold great potential for improving teaching and learning... when teachers receive regular, actionable feedback on their practice—rather than being left alone to assess their own progress—they are better able to make the instructional shifts called for by new college and career readiness standards, such as the Common Core State Standards.” While there is no single best framework or observational tool school do need to either pick a commercially available tool such as those designed by Charlotte Danielson or Robert Marzano (e.g. <http://www.iobservation.com/iObservation/classroom-observation-forms/>) or create a sensible form that addresses important instructional practices. I have developed a simple form that has proven flexible and useful based on recent IES (Institute on Education Sciences) literacy research summaries (link). It is important to note that the form I recommend is not for personnel evaluation thus it has no rubric component to grade or rate teachers. Rather, the focus is on observing the students, taking careful notes of what students say/write/do in response to the teaching being provided.

Learning the Language of Respectful/Actionable Feedback.

Most educators have not had the chance to learn, practice and refine their skills in terms of giving and receiving actionable feedback. Fortunately this is relatively easy to learn since it is the adult version of what they do every day with their students. I have found it is helpful to have a couple of simple yet powerful norms or shared dispositions established right from the beginning;

- √ **Humility** – no one knows it all, everyone can improve, feedback is actively sought, open mindedness is valued.
- √ **Curiosity** – interest in learning, changing, growing, questioning, wondering, figuring out how to become even more effective as teachers, inquiring together as colleagues working to improve our practice and have fun doing it!
- √ **Kindness/Respect** – care is taken to ensure all interactions are grounded in the “Golden Rule” – Kindness. The only word we a

With these simple, yet powerful norms in place we then go about building the language of observational feedback that is truly useful/actionable. A key idea here is to focus on what one observes the students doing not simply providing pedagogical opinions of the teaching. In other words, note specifically what you observe students saying/writing and otherwise doing during the lesson and link it to how the teaching was causal in this process – for that is what teachers can change or act upon. For example, providing phrases such as:

“It appeared effective when you _____, I noticed the students were _____.
I really appreciate how you _____ because it allowed students to _____.
I noticed that students _____ when you _____.
I thought is was (your favorite adjective, awesome/wonderful/etc) how you _____
because this supported students in _____.”

Avoid using the word “*should*” – or as I like to say, “No ‘should-ing’ on thy colleagues!!” (*should implies hubris and arrogance and almost always comes across in a way that shuts down receptivity and effective communication).

Remember, the feedback is NOT just for the teacher being observed, but for everyone on the Learning Walk Team because we all see different things and/or the same things but through a different “lens” of experience/ knowledge. Thus, the more specifically you can link what you observed the teacher doing to how the students responded, the more powerful/actionable the feedback is...

Tips to Keep in Mind

* First order of business is to thank the teacher for opening his/her door – without an open door we can't learn from one another, this is truly a gift the teacher has provided the Learning Walk team. Then we follow with a quick round of affirmations, sharing observations of important examples of students saying/writing/doing that was caused the particular strategies employed by the teacher.

* After a round of Affirmations there will be a round of: "Questions, Wonderings, and/or Suggestions"... food for thought, grist for the mill one might say... It is important to keep in mind while the affirmations feel good and are important to acknowledge, this information is usually not news to the teacher being observed (although it often is to one of more of the observers). However, the most useful feedback to the teacher being observed consists of the questions, wonderings and suggestions. As one principal put it, we don't want feedback that is too "vanilla – we are going for all 31 flavors!"

* Questions are meant to be raised NOT answered in the initial debriefing (save the exploration for PLC or other times where there is adequate time to explore/collaborate/discuss). It is important that the teacher being observed is not put on the defensive, rather they are part of a safe open-ended process that extends their thinking.

* Wonderings are simply open ended questions/speculations/more food for thought...

- e.g. "I wonder what the students would have done if you had _____?"

"I noticed students were _____, I wonder what might happen if you _____?"

* Suggestions are framed as actions to be checked out/validated by experience, not framed as THE only correct way to teach!

- e.g. "I've found it provides every student a chance to speak if you assign 1s and 2s in the partners and designate who is the first speaker and listener, give that a go and see what you find."

"I noticed only 6 students contributed to the discussion, I've found if you don't call on students with raised hands, rather prompt all students to think/write and then discuss with a partner first, everyone is able to contribute – give that a go and see how it works for your students."

Conclusion

As the management guru Ken Blanchard likes to say, "Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions". Sadly far too many our teachers have been skipping their metaphorical "breakfasts"! I have found there is truly transformative power in schools intentionally creating a culture of collaborative feedback. Not only does it directly impact instruction it provides an appropriate vehicle for stronger teachers to model, mentor and support their colleagues in meaningful improvement. It is impossible for a single person, principal or coach, to provide every teacher with the feedback they need to improve through formal personnel evaluation. Directly involving ALL teachers in the process of receiving and giving specific instructional feedback dramatically expands the opportunities for professional growth as well as helping individuals develop their own self-reflection skills (e.g. critiquing a video of their teaching before sitting down with the principal or coach more than doubles the effectiveness of this process). Beyond the obvious benefits to students and staff of improved instruction, creating a culture of collaboration brings people together, promotes professional candor, and is simply more fun! Please don't hesitate to drop me an email if you would like more details/resources regarding anything mentioned in this post.

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