

The Danger With Giving Students Feedback



A lot of people make a living by offering advice about how teachers should give feedback to students—or how administrators should give feedback to teachers. Unfortunately, a body of compelling theory and research raises troubling questions about much of that advice. It turns out that hearing how well we've done (typically from someone in a position of power) often doesn't lead us to improve.

“Feedback” originally referred to a self-regulating system like a thermostat in which output affects input. Thus, in keeping with the mechanical analogy, when the word is applied to human communication, it should refer only to information: “Here’s something you did that I noticed. ...” When feedback is contaminated with evaluation (“Here’s what I think about what you did. ...”), it tends to become not only less effective but often downright damaging—both to future performance and to recipients’ *interest* in whatever they were doing.

For decades, studies have shown that praising people when they succeed can be just as counterproductive as criticizing them when they fail. Nor does it help just to tweak the phrasing or to praise one thing rather than another (for example, effort rather than ability) because the problem rests with the experience of being judged. In the 1980s, researcher Ruth Butler [found](#)

that students often became more intrigued by a task when they received simple comments about what they had done, whereas praise “did not even maintain initial interest at its baseline level.” More recently, two Vanderbilt University researchers, Emily R. Fyfe and Bethany Rittle-Johnson, reported that students, particularly those who were reasonably proficient, did worse at math if they had previously received praise for succeeding.

What is true of the judgment inherent in praise is also true of the judgment inherent in grades. A series of meta-analyses published in 2020 by Duke University researchers showed that substantive feedback without any grade attached was preferable for promoting both motivation and achievement. In fact, getting a grade was more damaging to motivation than receiving no feedback at all, particularly for struggling students.

If good grades are just as destructive as bad grades, incidentally, it may be because the most striking feature of a positive evaluation isn't that it's positive but that it's an evaluation. (One psychologist remarked that kids would come to find it unpleasant even to watch TV if they were regularly evaluated for how well they did it.) But the central point here applies to adults as well as children, which is why teachers often bristle at having an administrator sit in judgment of them. What's remarkable is that some of these teachers may not think twice about subjecting their students to a constant stream of evaluations.

Why do evaluations backfire? First, because they, like other rewards, are typically experienced as controlling—and people don't like to be controlled. (Some early research found that praise is most likely to undermine interest when it's seen as manipulative.) Second, to receive a pat on the head (an A or a “Good job!”) for doing a task well serves to devalue that task; it's been reframed as just a prerequisite for receiving a reward. Finally, evaluation creates pressure to keep up the good work, which, in turn, leads to risk avoidance. If the point is to perform well, better to stick with what one is likely to succeed at—a posture not exactly conducive to learning or growth.

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Feedback is better than evaluation, but that doesn't mean it's always constructive. In fact, the most

comprehensive [review](#) of the research, comprising more than 600 experimental comparisons, found that even pure feedback often has a negative effect on performance. And even when the effect is positive, its impact may be small, and any learning that results may be shallow.

So what determines whether, and to what extent, feedback will help?

- Hearing that you succeeded at a task, not surprisingly, is more apt to strengthen interest than hearing that you didn't. (The supposed benefits of failure are wildly overrated.)
- Sometimes it's obvious whether your efforts paid off: Either the seed you planted sprouted, or it didn't; either readers are surprised by your ending, or they aren't. Such feedback is less likely to reduce interest than when someone *tells* you how well you did, which pulls you out of the learning experience. Students are then less engaged with *what* they're doing and more concerned with *how well* someone thinks they're doing it.

- Feedback is most likely to backfire when it's given publicly or in comparison with other people. Contrary to a widespread American myth, competition tends to undermine intrinsic motivation and achievement—for winners as well as losers.
- Feedback works best when it's just one step in a learning process rather than a final judgment, although even the formative kind isn't always beneficial (particularly if it's based on a test).
- It matters not only how but why feedback is given. If the rationale is experienced as manipulative (to meet someone else's standards), it may be damaging. The ideal scenario is for information to be offered at the recipient's request. In general, effective teachers and managers do a lot more asking than telling: "How can I help?" "What do you need to know?"

A final caveat: Even research suggesting that certain feedback can be useful turns out to be less reassuring than it appears because of dubious assumptions about what "useful" means. As Lorrie

Shepard at the University of Colorado [noticed](#), most studies of feedback “are based on behaviorist assumptions. Typically the outcome measures are narrowly defined [and] feedback consists of reporting right and wrong answers.” Thus, even if feedback “works,” it may do so only on tasks of questionable value, such as cramming forgettable facts into short-term memory.

With feedback, then, as with so much else in education, paying too much attention to perfecting a method distracts us from reflecting on our goal. And the goal should concern not only the quality of learning but the experience of the learner. Hence, educator Cris Tovani’s evocative confession: “I was concentrating so hard on ... trying to perfect the feedback ... [that] I forgot to focus on the kids.”