

This Spotlight looks at the importance of how feedback is received. Feedback is powerful because it affects what we believe about ourselves and to what we attribute success and failure. We should consider if too much feedback can create a dependency culture. Wrapped up in all of this are ideas behind beliefs and praise.

Attribution Theory

Giving feedback can often backfire and have startlingly unintended consequences depending on how students attribute success and failure. When we think about success and failure we find it almost impossible to avoid the *fundamental attribution error (placing great weight on internal, dispositional causes rather than external causes)*. Moreover the way we perceive success and failure is dependent on three factors.

1. *Personalisation*: the extent to which we believe success is influenced by *internal and external factors* - internal factors are within students' control, whereas external factors can be used as excuses on which to blame failure
2. *Stability*: whether success or failure is perceived to be transient or long lasting. If success or failure is perceived as stable then students may not believe they can improve, whereas if it's unstable then they can do something about it
3. *Specificity*: Whether success is interpreted as being likely to lead to success in other areas. Ideally students should see their success as specific rather than global so that failure in one area doesn't have to mean failure in other areas

In order for feedback to result in improvement, students need to believe that they can do something about their current performance. In other words students need to receive the message that their success is due to internal, unstable and specific factors.

The table below illustrates how easy it is to get feedback wrong.

Response Type	Feedback indicates performance...	
	Exceeds goal	Falls short of goal
Change Behaviour	Exert less effort	Increase effort
Change goal	Increase aspiration	Reduce aspiration
Abandon goal	Decide goal is too easy	Decide goal is too hard
Reject feedback	Feedback is ignored	Feedback is ignored

The only desirable outcomes of feedback are that students commit to aiming higher or trying harder. How often does feedback result in them making less effort, aiming lower and abandoning goals. Sometimes well-intentioned feedback has the effect of making students decide to give up or reduce their aspirations.

Dependency Culture.

Even though students require regular and timely intervention (in the form of feedback), too much of a good thing can be counterproductive and, in some cases, can lead to a culture of dependency in which students expect to be spoon-fed. Didau and Rose¹ assert that *"if our feedback acts as a crutch to prop up performance during the acquisition phase of learning, then we could be unwittingly undermining students' ability to retain and transfer what they are learning."* A suggestion here would be to 'scaffold feedback'. Judiciously withhold, delay and reduce feedback.

Allison and Tharmby² suggest that *"students must be given the space to think hard for themselves; they need room to make mistakes, to take the wrong path. Hold back from giving advice for ten minutes. Insist on individual work. Doing nothing can often be a better option to doing something. Exactly when to intervene and give feedback is never clear-cut; it will change depending on the situation, student and topic. There is no substitute for careful, purposeful decision-making coupled with honesty to adapt your practice when you get it wrong."*

We will return and challenge these ideas by looking at a **Focus on Failure and the Dangers of DIRT and Redrafting** in a future Briefing and Spotlight.

¹ Didau and Rose: *What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Psychology*

² Allison and Thaby: *Making Every Lesson Count*

Beliefs

At the risk of meandering too far from the focus of feedback, I think it is important to engage with the idea *that beliefs matter*. Generally speaking if you believe that you can do something then there is a good chance that you will put the effort in to be successful. Clearly beliefs need to conform to reality, but most people agree that anyone can get better at playing the piano or speaking French through practice and that hard work will help anyone, no matter what their current level of skill, to improve their ability to ski or do the cryptic crossword. But crucially not everyone believes that they can become more intelligent than they are currently. These ideas should frame our feedback.....(For more on this read Dweck's widely popular book *Mindset*, though the findings are not entirely uncontroversial, and have perhaps been 'dumbed' down by some institutions in an attempt to embed a 'growth mindset culture').

Messages about effort

What is clear for our focus on feedback is that some students give up because they don't believe they are clever enough. If you're never going to succeed, what's the point in trying? Other students seek to protect their fragile egos by not trying hard as they might - if you haven't tried then you have a ready made excuse for failure. Of course in feedback no teacher would attribute failure to ability - but we may well communicate this inadvertently.

Therefore we should focus on what students can control - such as the effort they have invested in a task and the strategies they use. It can be useful to suggest that there are two types of work - excellent work and work which has not yet been finished. However, attributing failure to lack of effort is also problematic. Sometimes we don't need to work harder, we just need to work differently.

The overriding component in all this is that through feedback the student must believe that they can improve through their own efforts. Probably the best way of achieving this is for the students to experience some success as a consequence of applying greater effort.

Gender differences?

A common narrative is that when boys do well, they tend to attribute it to their ability, conversely girls attribute success to their effort. When they do less well, boys claim it is due to lack of effort, however girls tend to think it is their ability.....

- *Do you agree*
- *What implications does this have for the feedback we give and when we give it?*

Praise

Students' beliefs can be affected by the way that teachers communicate with them.

- Avoid personal praise
- Phrase feedback in terms of the product, the effort involved or the process used

But if we praise students for completing unchallenging tasks we may end up convincing them that success should be effortless, or that we have low expectations. It maybe tempting to give a sympathetic or enthusiastic response to a students work. But is a student knows it is not very good, or certainly not their best work, they may interpret that praise as meaning that the teacher doesn't expect very much of them. It is probably best to be 'tactically grumpy', hard to please, sceptical of excuses and exceptionally sparing with praise, thereby conveying the highest of expectations. Clearly this all comes down to teacher judgement.

Key Messages

* Feedback should be

- Specific and clear and focused on the task rather than the student and targeted to increase students' task commitment
- Explanatory and focused on improvement, not just verifying performance
- Designed to attribute outcomes to internal factors that students can control
- Designed to make students consider unstable factors that are dependent on effort

* Much well intentioned feedback can backfire resulting in students aiming lower or giving up. Feedback is more likely to be effective if it helps students believe that making an effort will result in an improvement, or adopting a more challenging goal is worthwhile

* Often, the most important factor in determining the impact of feedback is the relationship the teacher has with the student

* It will probably benefit students for teachers to reduce the quantity and frequency of feedback over time to help prevent students from becoming overly dependent.

* Students are more motivated if through our feedback they believe that intelligence and ability can be improved through hard work.

* We can contribute to students' beliefs about their ability to improve their intelligence by praising productive student effort and strategies, rather than their ability

* Our feedback needs to be clear that just making more effort won't always work - knowing how to apply effort effectively is crucial

* Just as teachers can support students to risk failure by removing high-stakes consequences, school leaders can support teachers to learn from mistakes by fostering a culture where mistakes and struggle are embraced - our peer collaboration?