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Guiding the Budding Writer

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How we comment on students' work can give students a larger vision for their own potential.

Thomas Newkirk, a seasoned and successful writer, once took a draft of his writing to the Pulitzer Prize–winning author Donald Murray for feedback. After scanning the draft, Murray simply asked, "What's this about?" His question caused Newkirk to reflect on this piece of writing and better focus it by cutting the first three pages (Newkirk, 2012, p. 116).

Four-year-old Abby had a similar experience when she made a book in preschool and showed it to educator Matt Glover. Matt asked her what the book was about. Seeing that she didn't understand his question, he said, "Remember how *Owl Babies* was all about the owls and their mommy, and Tessa's book was all about a butterfly and a lady? What's your book about?" (Ray & Glover, 2008, p. 144).

In both these cases, feedback helped develop the authors' vision for themselves and their work. Both anecdotes shed light on the relationship between feedback and the development of authors of all ages. Let's consider the significance of the feedback for Abby. With two sentences, Matt helped her understand that books are *about* something, that a book is an important social contract. He accomplished this by drawing Abby's attention to a helpful resource for reflection—other authors' work. He made it clear that Abby is an author, just like Martin Waddell, who wrote *Owl Babies*, and Tessa, who wrote about the lady and the butterfly.

Matt's feedback positioned Abby to begin to think, as authors do, about other authors' work and what she might learn from them. In response to this feedback and the related classroom conversations, Abby began to have conversations with her peers about their writing. Thus Matt began the process of making Abby independent of her teachers' feedback. This is one thing effective feedback accomplishes; beyond improving one particular book, essay, or assignment, it has a larger vision. Matt's feedback looked to the future, inviting Abby to become the kind of person who makes books about something and who observes work by people similar to herself to learn new possibilities.

Four Truths About Feedback

These examples illustrate four important points about feedback that we often miss. First, giving feedback doesn't necessarily mean telling students what's good or bad. Actually, it doesn't necessarily mean *telling* them anything; notice how Donald Murray and Matt Glover began with questions.

Second, feedback should be inseparable from the larger classroom conversations. Matt's feedback to Abby didn't stand alone. Abby's preschool teacher had already fostered conversations that drew attention to the choices authors make and the logic of those choices. We might call this *public feedback*. In a 1st grade class, public feedback might include observations like,

I notice Jamal made this word big and bold and in uppercase letters with an exclamation point. That means he wants me to read it very loudly. Remember how in *Roller Coaster*, Marla Frazee wrote the word *WHOOSH* in big uppercase letters, too?

Such public feedback is part of the same conversation that identifies students as authors. It draws the classroom community's attention to processes that inform authors' decisions. Adding, "That means he wants me to read it very loudly" reminds students that the teacher, now in the role of reader, is partly under the control of the writer, thus focusing young authors on strategic thinking in relation to readers.

Similarly, when reading *What Happened to Cass McBride?* to 8th graders, the teacher might say, "I wonder why Gail Giles chose to use so many flashbacks in the story." Such conversations about authors' mental processes have an additional benefit. They require imagining what's going on in another person's mind. The more students practice imagining authors' thinking, the more they are inclined to do so independently and to become better writers and readers. At the same time, as students imagine fellow authors' thoughts and feelings, their social imagination expands—which leads to better social behavior (Johnston, 2012).

Third, feedback is not merely cognitive in reach, nor merely corrective in function. Like the rest of classroom talk, feedback affects the ways students understand themselves and one another—how they perceive themselves as writers. When a teacher draws a student's attention to the compositional choices he or she made to construct a convincing argument, the teacher invites that student to construct a self-narrative that says, I did *x* (added a detail to my illustration of a key point), the consequence of which was *y* (I got my meaning across better). This kind of feedback positions students as people who can accomplish things by acting strategically.

Fourth, optimal feedback is responsive, meaning it's adjusted to what the individual writer is likely to need. To give Abby feedback, Matt had to know something about what young authors need to understand—and he had to recognize the signs of her understanding.

Teachers who want to provide feedback that strengthens each learner's writing skills, motivation, and independence should keep five principles in mind. Although I've used writing as the focus of my examples, the same principles hold for other areas of academic learning.

Five Key Principles

1. Context matters.

Context affects feedback. When students are fully engaged, we can provide ample differentiated feedback to individuals because we don't have to worry about managing the behavior of other students. Students who are working on something personally and socially meaningful know when they need feedback and come looking for it (Ivey & Johnston, 2012), and they are more receptive to critical feedback. By contrast, a student reading an unengaging text or doing a math problem that's too difficult will likely disengage. Teachers' feedback will then be about behavior rather than academic learning, and any academic feedback will likely be given too quickly, leaving little

thinking time and undermining the student's control. If teachers commit to involving students in personally meaningful projects, productive feedback will follow.

There are, of course, contexts in which feedback is unlikely to be heard. When we give a grade as part of our feedback, students routinely read only as far as the grade. In general, students value feedback less after the work is completed than when it's still in progress. If we give a writer more control over the feedback—such as by asking what aspect of the work he or she would like feedback on—the writer is more likely to tune in.

2. Teachers aren't the sole source.

Feedback comes from other students as much as from teachers—which is a good thing if we capitalize on it. When we teach students to teach as well as to learn about good writing, feedback becomes more immediately available and plentiful. This means that part of our students' language arts development should involve learning how to give feedback to others—how to respond to other learners. Fostering peer feedback expands the reach of our teaching.

With peer feedback, classroom talk becomes a reflective surface in which students can see their own work. They hear students talking with peers or with the teacher about writing and use those conversations to reflect on their own writing. Ideally, community conversations will respond to all students' efforts. Students will then have a forum in which they can request feedback from peers and teach others.

3. A focus on process empowers students.

Responsive feedback communities use three key practices. The first is listening. Until we understand where a person is coming from, it's hard to provide responsive feedback. The second is publicly noticing the significant decisions authors make and encouraging students to do the same. The third practice I call *causal process feedback*. This is feedback on how a student's choices affected the finished product. For example, "Look how you revised that—you added examples of the colonists' complaints against tyranny to your essay. Now I see what you mean" (Ray & Glover, 2008, p. 164). This feedback turns the student's attention to the writing process and makes the student's experience into a tool for future composing. Causal process feedback is at the heart of building a sense of agency: It helps demystify the skill of writing.

We can turn students' attention to the process by asking something like, "How did you solve that problem with your lead paragraph?" The question invites students to articulate a causal connection between a set of behaviors and an outcome.

Feedback that emphasizes processes helps learners not only persist in the face of difficulty but also find more solutions to problems. Feedback that focuses on effort ("You really tried hard") has the same benefits (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). In my view, however, it's less useful for two reasons. First, you can't say it unless you know the student *did* try hard. Second, a comment focused only on effort misses the chance that other students will overhear—and benefit from—a teacher's comment about how a strategy one student used improved a piece of writing.

4. "Positive" doesn't mean praising.

Positive feedback motivates students and gives them the tools to improve. Teachers often confuse being positive with providing praise. They are not the same. The trouble with praise is that it has side effects (Dweck, 2007). If we praise a student who's fully

engaged, we simply distract her and suggest that her real goal should be to please us. In Matt's feedback to Abby, he did not say, "I like the way you …" because that would place him in the authority role and suggest that the goal of Abby's efforts is to please him. Feedback like, "Good girl," is even less helpful because it carries no useful information—it merely lets the student know that she is being judged. Public praise is even more problematic: If we say "good" to one student and "excellent" to another, suddenly "good" damns with faint praise.

Praise is not so good for creating independently driven writers, and sometimes it's downright destructive. Phrases that invite a symmetrical power relationship and a message of student contribution ("Thank you for helping us figure that out" or even "Thank you") are more useful.

Ordinarily, teachers don't need praise to make a student feel good about the book he has just made or the math problem she has solved. We can just point out what was accomplished and ask, "How did you do that?" Or, respond to each as one writer (or researcher or filmmaker) to another ("Your piece made me really want to do something about homelessness"). Or, we might ask, "How does it feel to have completed your first poem?"

The challenge in being positive comes when students attempt something that stretches them beyond what they can do and results in errors. These errors may nonetheless reflect useful strategic thinking. Being positive here requires not being distracted by the many things that did *not* go well, and instead focusing students' attention on what was partially successful. For example, "I see you figured out the first part of that word by using a word you already know. I wonder whether that would also work for the second part of the word." Drawing attention to the successful part not only consolidates a useful strategy, but also builds a foundation for further productive writing.

5. Feedback shifts how students see themselves.

Feedback sets in motion conversations that affect how students make sense of themselves. Thus, it's particularly important that feedback not contain judgmental comments or comments that cast students in terms of permanent traits. This includes comments like, "You're a good writer," "That's what good readers do," and even, "I'm proud of you." If we make these statements when students are successful, when they fail, they will fill in the other end of the conversation ("You're not good at this," "I'm disappointed in you") (Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Judgment-tinged feedback nudges students toward a world made up of people who are good artists or not good artists, smart or not.

By contrast, students who hear "You did a good job," which mildly turns attention to the process rather than the person, are more likely to try again the activity at which they were previously unsuccessful. Even better is something akin to "You found a way to solve the problem. Are there any other ways you can think of to solve it? "

What's the Point?

The primary goal of feedback is to improve the future possibilities for each individual learner and for the learning community. This means expanding, for every learner, the vision of what's possible, the strategic options for getting there, the necessary knowledge, and the learner's persistence. Teachers aren't merely teaching skills and

correcting errors. We're teaching *people* who wish to competently participate in valued social practices—the practices that writers, mathematicians, artists, and others do every day.

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