

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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Research Monograph # 29

How can feedback be used as a teaching tool to support students' writing development?

Improving Student Writing

Using Feedback as a Teaching Tool

By Shelley Stagg Peterson
OISE/University of Toronto

Research Tells Us

- Few students are interested in incorporating feedback to improve their writing once they have received their grades.
- When students receive feedback while they are writing, they are more inclined to use it to revise and edit their drafts.
- Ongoing teacher feedback is a form of differentiated instruction, not just for individual students but for small groups and the class as a whole.
- Peers can also make helpful contributions to students' writing development.

SHELLEY STAGG PETERSON is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE. A former elementary teacher in Alberta, Shelley now teaches pre-service and graduate courses in literacy and children's literature. Her research interests include gender issues in writing, feedback as a tool for teaching writing, and teaching writing using digital technology and multimedia.

Teachers provide feedback on student writing to support students' writing development and nurture their confidence as writers. Teacher feedback often takes the form of written comments on their final graded compositions.¹ Received by students at the end of their writing process, these comments rarely have as great an impact on students' writing development as teachers intend.² Students generally feel that they have finished working on the writing when they hand it in for a grade. While praise and high grades may instill greater confidence in some students' abilities as writers, few students are interested in incorporating feedback to improve compositions for which they've already received grades.³

Given that teachers spend a great deal of time providing written feedback to students, it is important that the feedback have a greater influence on students' writing development. Verbal or written feedback can be a powerful teaching tool if it is given while students are in the process of writing drafts. Comments on drafts of writing provide students with timely information about the clarity and impact of their writing. When students receive feedback while they are writing, they are more inclined to use it to revise and edit their drafts than they would be if they received the suggestions on a graded, polished copy.⁴ They also have an immediate opportunity to try out the suggestions in their writing, allowing for meaningful application of what they have learned from the feedback. Focusing on individual students' immediate writing needs, this ongoing feedback is a form of differentiated instruction that complements the teaching of mini-lessons to small groups or to the whole class.⁵

The teaching tools discussed below support all students, Grades 4 to 12.

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Teacher Feedback

Teacher feedback should be both criterion-based and reader-based.⁶ Criterion-based feedback indicates how well the writing meets the criteria on scoring guides or rubrics. This feedback refers to features such as the appropriateness of the ideas and information, the level of detail and the chosen point of view. Criterion-based feedback also addresses the clarity of communication through the organization of ideas and use of writing conventions and effective language. This type of feedback is most useful when students have previously been given the assessment criteria and have a clear understanding of the expectations. Indeed, students gain a deeper understanding of the expectations when they have an opportunity to participate in determining the assessment criteria.⁷

Reader-based feedback reflects the reader's experience of the writing. Such feedback identifies images visualized, emotions evoked and words or phrases that had the greatest impact on the reader. It also describes how the writing makes the reader feel and summarizes what the writing says to the reader. Because writing is a form of communication, student writers benefit from reader-based feedback, as they get a sense of how well their writing achieves the intended communicative purpose (e.g., to entertain, inform or persuade).⁶

Teachers can determine the content of the feedback by considering the elements of the writing that are strong or that need more work.⁸ It is important to identify positive features of the writing. Although students have indicated that they do not always find positive comments helpful to improve their writing, they appreciate receiving praise to nurture their confidence as writers and their motivation to write.⁹ Students say that they find elaborated comments on specific elements of their writing most helpful in guiding their revisions. They appreciate teachers getting involved with the subject of their writing, but do not like to have their ideas questioned or criticized.⁹

Creating Spaces for Feedback

Verbal Feedback from the Teacher

Verbal feedback may be given as teachers circulate around the room while students are writing. Students may request their teachers' input, or teachers may offer a commendation or suggestion as students draft and revise their writing. Verbal feedback may also be given in student-teacher conferences. Students may sign up to meet with their teacher when they feel ready for feedback, or they may meet with teachers on a regular basis. Effective as both teaching and assessment tools, student-teacher conferences provide individualized instruction for students and opportunities to gather information about students' thinking and writing processes.¹⁰

Student-teacher conferences are most effective when there is a dialogue between student and teacher, with each learning something from the interaction.⁴ The student may ask for help in a particular area or ask what effect the writing has on the teacher-as-reader; the teacher may ask about the students' goals (for both their writing and for themselves as writers), their impressions of the strongest parts of their writing and their thoughts on what they have learned through writing a particular composition.

Scheduling one-on-one time with students is always difficult. It is not necessary to read and respond to every student's writing every week. Reasonably, teachers should aim to provide feedback to each student in five to ten minute student-teacher conferences, every two to three weeks. It is important to keep a record of the topics of these conferences, to create an ongoing picture of students' writing development.⁵

Teachers can use the notes to praise students for the improvements they see from one conference to the next. Students can use the notes to reflect on the challenges they have had in trying to achieve goals set in previous conferences.

Peer feedback that has the greatest impact ...

- The writer and her or his peers play with ideas to move the writing forward when the writer is stuck.
- Peers ask for clarification about something that is confusing or about missing information.
- Peers give their emotional response to the writing (e.g., that it makes them laugh or that they find a character repugnant).
- Peers question the plausibility of particular events or ideas.

Peer Feedback on Student Writing

Research shows that peers can also make helpful contributions to students' writing development.⁷ They provide reader-based feedback that shows student writers the effect that the writing is having on a peer audience (often the intended audience for elementary students' writing).

Peer feedback helps to develop student writers' sense of audience – their recognition of the perspectives, language, sentence structure, voice and other elements of writing that provoke, entertain or satisfy their audience.¹¹ In classrooms where desks are arranged so that students can easily talk to each other, students may ask peers for feedback spontaneously, as they feel it is needed.

Teachers may set up more formal opportunities for peer feedback by scheduling time for students to exchange their writing with peers or to read compositions aloud to peers in a small group setting. A reading is followed by a discussion of what the peers got out of the writing, what stands out about the writing and what questions the writing raises. Many teachers use a “two stars and a wish” framework, asking peers to identify two elements of students' writing that they thought were strong and one element that could be improved.¹²

Teachers may model effective dialogue when giving and receiving feedback on writing, showing how the student writers can ask questions, talk about their intentions and identify parts that they felt were strong or weak, in conversation with peers who talk about their impressions.

Peer feedback should be valued for the information it provides about how readers respond to a piece of writing. However, peers are not the best providers of criterion-based feedback, because they often do not have the needed grasp of conventions. Teacher feedback is generally more useful for moving students along in their use of writing conventions.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Student Autonomy for Using Feedback

Students feel a greater commitment to improving their writing when they have the autonomy to decide whether or not to incorporate the feedback in subsequent drafts.¹⁰ Students should always feel that they may use the feedback in their own way – that the feedback is suggestive, rather than prescriptive.

To support students' sense of ownership of their writing, feedback should:

- be given in the spirit of showing student writers the positive effects their writing has on readers
- identify potential areas where students may revise their writing to clarify meaning or more fully engage readers
- take the form of suggestions, observations and open-ended questions, rather than instructions and criticisms

Student writers will not be able to benefit from feedback that they do not fully understand.³ Invite students to:

- explain their interpretations of the feedback and speculate what they might do to use the feedback (Explaining their plans for using the feedback may also strengthen commitment to improving their writing.) and
- submit a “revise-and-resubmit” letter, explaining how the feedback has been addressed, or providing a rationale for disregarding it (Writing such letters enhances students' metacognitive awareness of their writing processes and intentions.³)

Implications for Practice

Ways to build students' sense of ownership ...

- Show student writers the positive effects their writing has on readers.
- Identify potential areas where students may revise their writing to clarify meaning or more fully engage readers.
- Provide suggestions, observations and open-ended questions, rather than instructions and criticisms.

Students say that they find elaborated comments on specific elements of their writing most helpful in guiding their revisions.

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Timing of Feedback

Feedback on writing is most valuable to students' writing development when it takes place at the beginning and middle stages of the writing process. This is the time when students can use the feedback to revise and edit their writing.

- Allot a small percentage of the final grade to handing in a draft by a certain date or at particular intervals.
 - Automatically give the grade to students who hand in the drafts.
 - Write comments on the drafts, which the students may use when making revisions.
 - Mark the final copies by assigning a grade and writing a few comments, noting how the students have improved their writing subsequent to handing in the initial drafts.
- Give feedback on the content, organization and style features of the writing in early drafts.
 - If students focus on writing conventions early in the writing process, their flow of ideas may be curtailed.
 - In addition, students may edit sentences that will later be cut during revisions.
- Give feedback on adherence to writing conventions when the writing is almost complete.⁵
 - Focus on one or two features of the writing that could be improved.⁸
 - Identify patterns of convention errors, rather than every error in the paper. Students are more likely to learn how to use a convention correctly if they attend exclusively to that type of error when editing their writing.⁵

In Sum

Student writers learn about the power of writing when peers and their teacher provide reader-based feedback about what they learned, what engaged them and what evoked strong emotions. Criterion-based feedback, particularly from teachers, allows students to see how closely specific features of their writing match the expectations for that writing. Responsive to students' immediate needs, verbal and written feedback provided on drafts of students' writing is a powerful tool to support students writing development.

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