



FEEDBACK AS A CONVERSATION:

The Power of Bidirectional Feedback

What distinguishes an average performer from an expert? A piano player from a virtuoso? An amateur from a chess Grandmaster? Ericsson and Pool in *Peak: Secrets From the New Science of Expertise* discovered that the primary difference was deliberate practice.¹ “Deliberate practice is purposeful practice that knows where it’s going and how to get there.”² One element of deliberate practice is feedback.³ Feedback is also ranked as one of the top contributors to student learning in Hattie’s *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*,⁴ and Quinton and Smallbone observed that “Feedback is the most powerful single factor that enhances achievement and increases the probability that learning will happen.”⁵

Feedback can be made even more powerful when it is bidirectional—not just given to students but also sought

by teachers from students. Hattie discussed how he realized the value of bidirectional feedback. In the early 1990s, he had already discovered that feedback was one of the most important influences on achievement, but he didn’t understand the role it played. He thought its influence stemmed primarily from what teachers provided for students, but then he discovered that feedback was most impactful when it moved from student to teacher.⁶

How can teachers seek feedback from their students? One way is to ask for feedback from students on the feedback that they are given. A teacher gives feedback and asks students to reflect upon it, after which he or she responds to the students’ reflections. Thus, the instruction moves “from monologue to dialogue.”⁷ The focus of this article is to discuss why getting students involved in a feedback dialogue is valuable and how teachers can use this simple technique to invite students into this conversation.

BY JULIE COOK

The Value of a Feedback Dialogue

One value of engaging in a feedback dialogue is that it allows teachers to examine the effectiveness of the feedback they give. Price et al. studied how teachers and students viewed bidirectional feedback—feedback given and received. They concluded that teachers “lived with the dissonance about its benefits and their beliefs about the limited extent of student engagement but rarely attempted to measure the effect of the feedback they provid[ed].”⁸ Faculty measured the effectiveness of feedback given to the students by its quantity rather than its quality.⁹

Student responses to feedback given by teachers can be used to test the quality of the feedback. Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel give an example of this; they compare self-testing to pilots relying on instruments instead of their senses, since pilots are vulnerable to a “host of perceptual illusions.”¹⁰ Self-testing, like flight instruments, can reveal illusions of student mastery and help teachers take corrective action. For teachers, seeking feedback from students on feedback given is a way to self-test, to fly using instruments instead of perception. It answers the question, “Is the feedback given effective?” Every feedback cycle—giving students feedback and receiving their response to it—can then become a learning opportunity for both teachers and students. When teachers learn how their feedback was received, they can become even better at giving feedback.

A feedback dialogue also helps to facilitate clearer communication with students. Price et al. said, “Written feedback without dialogue often create[s] frustration and disengagement.”¹¹ For example, one student wrote about a teacher’s feedback, “What does clarify your aims and objectives mean?”¹² When teachers ask students to respond to feedback, they create an opportunity for students to help their instructors clarify the feedback.

Asking for a response also addresses another problem with monologic feedback. When teachers provide feedback without requiring a response,

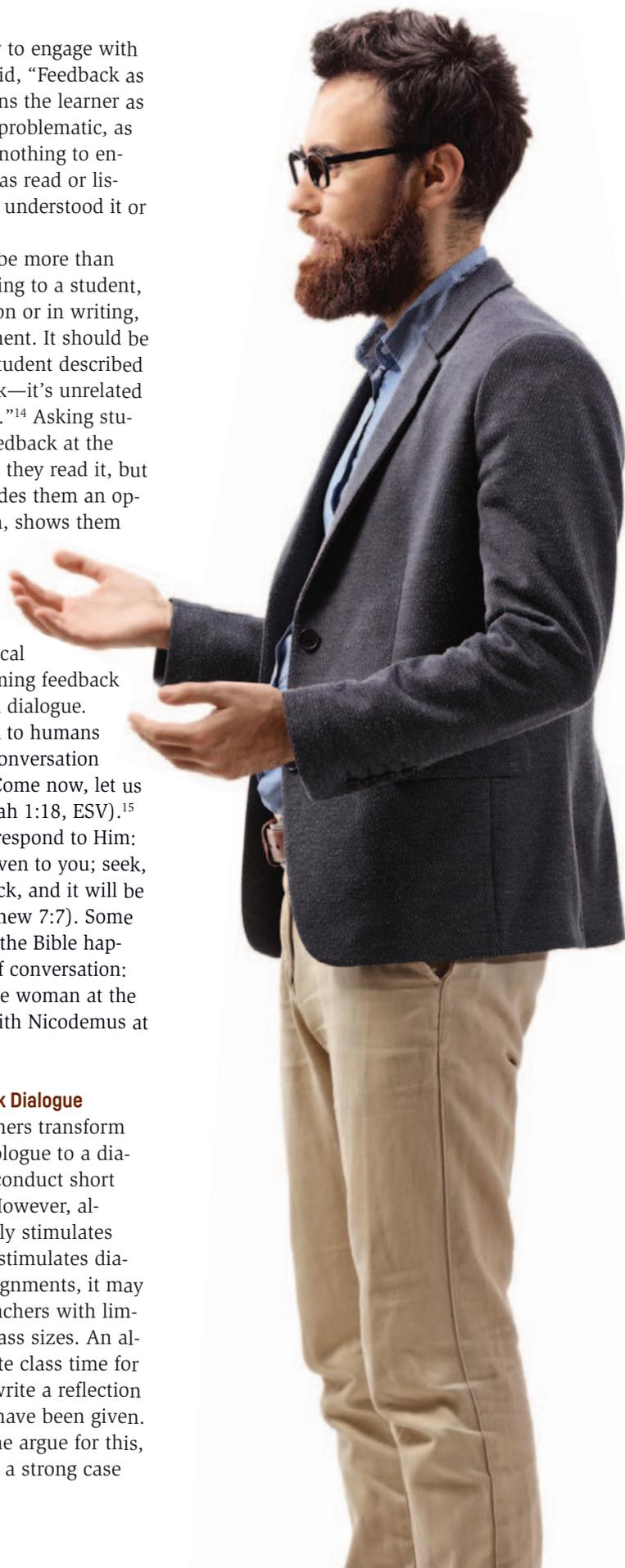
students are less likely to engage with it. Ajjawi and Boud said, “Feedback as ‘telling,’ which positions the learner as a passive recipient, is problematic, as the act of telling does nothing to ensure that the learner has read or listened to the feedback, understood it or acted upon it.”¹³

Feedback needs to be more than just a teacher responding to a student, whether in conversation or in writing, about a single assignment. It should be more than what one student described as “just a one-off block—it’s unrelated to everything else I do.”¹⁴ Asking students to respond to feedback at the very least ensures that they read it, but more important, provides them an opportunity for reflection, shows them that feedback is valuable, and helps them connect feedback to their next assignment.

There is also a biblical precedent for transforming feedback from a monologue to a dialogue. God doesn’t just speak to humans but calls them into a conversation with Him. He says: “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18, ESV).¹⁵ He invites humans to respond to Him: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). Some of the best learning in the Bible happened in the context of conversation: Jesus speaking with the woman at the well and His talking with Nicodemus at night.

How to Start a Feedback Dialogue

How then can teachers transform feedback from a monologue to a dialogue? One way is to conduct short writing conferences. However, although this successfully stimulates student response and stimulates dialogue about essay assignments, it may not be practical for teachers with limited time and larger class sizes. An alternative is to designate class time for students to read and write a reflection on the feedback they have been given. Quinton and Smallbone argue for this, writing that: “There is a strong case



for linking time spent in class on reflection to the feedback and assessment cycle. Students are interested in and value feedback, and there is evidence . . . that it can prompt reflection and deeper learning.”¹⁶

Quinton and Smallbone developed a set of questions that can be asked during class time:

1. “What are my feelings about this feedback?” allows students “to separate their emotional response to the feedback from rational thought and begin to reflect.”¹⁷

2. “What do I think about the feedback?”¹⁸ provides for analysis and evaluation of the feedback.

3. “Based on this feedback, what actions could I take to improve my work for another assignment?”¹⁹ encourages students to consider the relationships between assignments.

Quinton and Smallbone’s questions are helpful; however, I have developed my own two questions to create a “Feedback on Feedback” survey that takes only about 10 to 15 minutes of class time: (1) What did you learn from the feedback? and (2) Do you have any questions about the feedback? The first question encourages reflection on the feedback; the second provides for clarification of the feedback. I have used this survey for several years and have found that it adds value to my feedback. Much of the enhanced value has occurred in the areas already mentioned regarding the importance of a dialogic approach to feedback.

The Impact of a Feedback Dialogue on a Classroom

The first added value I have noticed is the provision of a window when I can assess the feedback I have given. Prior to using this survey, I was like the participants in the Price et al. study who didn’t know whether the feedback they had given was effective.²⁰ Kluger and DeNisi wrote: “Most critically, we . . . suggest that practitioners interested in developing and implementing feedback interventions take the time to test the effectiveness

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of . . . interventions rather than simply assume that they work.”²¹ One way I was able to assess the feedback I provided was that it helped to reveal gaps between what I thought I was communicating and what my students understood. For example, one student asked why several sentences were underlined in her essay. I had intended this as a compliment to her since I underline sentences that stand out to me; however, given the panicked way she asked the question, I realized I needed to clarify my intent by adding positive comments whenever I underlined a sentence.

Reading student responses also showed me gaps in their learning, since they made comments such as the following:

- “How could I have tied the sub-topics together better?”
- “I don’t understand how to write consistently using third person.”
- “I got confused with in-text citations.”
- “I wish we had gone over APA [style] more before we turned in our papers.”

Knowing the topics about which students felt confused provided me with direction for planning subsequent class periods.

The survey also addressed how well students understood feedback. It both permitted and encouraged them to ask clarifying questions about the feedback I had provided. Often this involved a student raising his or her hand while taking the feedback survey and asking me to come over and talk. At this point, the student might point out a specific comment on his or her paper and ask, “What do you mean by this?” Before I gave the survey, students rarely asked clarifying questions about my feedback unless it involved disputing a grade, but since I began to dedicate class time for reflection on my feedback, my students have felt more comfortable asking questions. These questions and my follow-up has increased my students’ understanding of the feedback.

Students’ response to feedback has also deepened their learning. It solidifies what they have learned from the feedback and gives them additional insights into their writing. One student responded to the feedback survey by saying, “I’ve learned that to have an effective paper, you need to understand your sources.” Another student said, “Small statements I make that are specific help readers imagine what I’ve gone through.” Reflection has also provided opportunity for “feedforward”; that is, it provides them with further direction for future work. A student said, “The feedback pointed out what I need to practice and focus on, as well as encouraged me on my writing strengths.”

Starting a dialogue around feedback is clearly beneficial to both teachers and students. The value of feedback surveys became clear to me as the result of my experience in teaching four sections of composition each semester for several years. Each semester felt like a grading marathon; I had to respond to about 800 pages of student writing. Although I spent

10 to 15 hours per assignment giving feedback, it had not occurred to me to set aside even 10 or 15 minutes of class time for the students to reflect on my feedback!

Like many teachers, I knew that giving good feedback was one of my responsibilities, but I had thought very little about the students' responsibility regarding my feedback. I hoped that they read it and wished they would do more with it than crumple it up and throw it in the trash, but beyond that, I hadn't considered what they would or could do with it.

My lack of awareness could have occurred because feedback as dialogue is a relatively new concept in the literature, having developed only over the past 10 years or so.²² I felt energized by my recognition that there was plenty of recent literature on the value of asking students to reflect on feedback. Dawson et al. discuss teachers like me

when they say, "We do not know to what extent staff and students have been brought along with the changing understandings of feedback occurring in the literature."²³ Only as I reflected on the amount of work I invested in grading essays and wondered how to ensure that my efforts achieved greater impact did I realize I needed to develop new strategies, and thus began to ask for feedback on my feedback. Later, I discovered the literature supported this move!

Teaching, especially teaching writing that requires copious amounts of reading and responding, allows little time for reflection. If you haven't already asked what impact your feedback is making on students, start doing so. The method I have used is simple and does not require much class time—maybe an additional hour out of a semester. It doesn't add much work, either, since many of the questions students ask about feedback can

be easily answered in class while they are completing the survey. It might require occasionally reviewing material already covered or adding lessons to a tight schedule, but even these need not take much time. A 10-minute lecture response to questions that several students have asked about the feedback given to them by the instructor is class time well spent.

Overcoming Barriers to a Feedback Dialogue

While I believe I have a good case for the value and ease of bidirectional feedback, I do recognize there are barriers to achieving it. One barrier is that it may make teachers feel vulnerable. What if students criticize the feedback? I have received very few negative responses from students as a result of the feedback I have given them. The handful of negative responses



have been comments such as “Why a 76 percent?!” and “Hopefully, I never come across a literature review again in my life.” There will always be the possibility of negative responses, but even those reactions are instructive, revealing where change is needed, which is exactly what I want from my students when I give them feedback.

Some teachers might be afraid that by encouraging students to ask questions about feedback, they will open Pandora’s Box, out of which will emerge students who persistently haggle and criticize rather than pose legitimate questions or concerns. I’ve rarely had students use the feedback survey as a place to argue about their grade. If anything, asking for feedback has challenged my own assumptions about students—for example, that they only care about grades and not about learning. Before I started doing the feedback survey, most of my interactions over feedback were with students who expressed dissatisfaction about their grade. Now my interactions are with the whole class, and are more diverse than in the past. The biggest surprise is the positive reactions I’ve received from my feedback. Students have made comments such as these:

- “I loved the feedback; it helped me see what I need to work on.”
- “The feedback I got on the essay was clear and made sense.”
- “The feedback was great to better my grammar.”
- “I liked the way you read through my paper; you helped me notice things.”
- “Thank you for the detailed feedback.”

Those comments encouraged me and made me want to continue the hard work of feedback. Teachers often think of feedback as a tool to motivate students, but positive feedback from students can motivate us as well. Their responses help us see that we are not responding to work in a vacuum and that the work of feedback does have an impact on students.

In *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*, Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel recommend making small moves in teaching that can significantly affect student learning.²⁴ They wrote: “Much of what we’ve been doing as teachers and students isn’t serving us well, but some comparatively simple changes could make a big difference.”²⁵ One such change is to engage in bidirectional feedback. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



Julie Cook, MA, is Vice-Chair for Humanities for the Health and Biomedical Sciences Department at AdventHealth University (AHU)

in Orlando, Florida, U.S.A. As part of her role as Vice-Chair, she helped start the Honors Program at the university. Ms. Cook also teaches public speaking and English composition. She earned her BS in Social Studies from Pacific Union College (Angwin, California, U.S.A.) and her MA in English from La Sierra University (Riverside, California). She is currently pursuing a PhD in Strategic Communication at University of Central Florida (Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.). She started teaching in 2004, first abroad in Taiwan and Thailand; then in 2010, she began her tenure at AHU. ✍

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