

# Teaching Students How to Manage Feedback

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The classroom is a non-stop hub of feedback: test grades, assignment scores, paper comments, peer review, individual conferences, nonverbal cues, and more. Feedback is essential for student learning.

Still, students' ability to process and use feedback varies widely. We have some students who eagerly accept feedback or carefully apply rough draft comments, while many others dread or dismiss their professors' notes or reject exam grades as "unfair." Although feedback is integral to our classrooms and work spaces, we often forget to teach students how to manage it.

Two Harvard law professors, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, argue that identifying different kinds of feedback is a good place to start. Their book *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (2014) divides feedback into three types (35):

- **Appreciation:** to see, acknowledge, give credit, or thank
- **Coaching:** to help the receiver fine-tune skills, tweak understanding, increase knowledge, improve, or to address the giver's feelings or a sense of relationship
- **Evaluation:** to score against expectations to shape decision-making

Although Stone and Heen's book is intended for a wide audience, their ideas can help us coach students into better feedback response. Here are a few examples:

## 1. Teach students to reflect on their reactions to the three categories of feedback.

From the athletic field to the orchestra pit, the categories of feedback are the same. Still, we've seen many accomplished student athletes and musicians struggle to embrace feedback in the classroom like they do in their extracurricular activities. Asking students to reflect on the moments when they've been at their best and worst in response to feedback can help bridge that gap. For example, a successful basketball player in our class explained

how well he responded to repeated corrections on the court but hated all coaching feedback on essays and class projects. Reflecting on the three types of feedback gave him a way to rethink various encounters. After all, it might not have seemed like his coach was using appreciation with his coaching feedback, but every made 3-point shot brought applause. Maybe, he reasoned, he needed to hear a little recognition of his effort (appreciation) before he could embrace coaching feedback in the classroom.

Consider having students reflect upon contexts other than the classroom where they process feedback. Ask students to reflect on a specific moment of negative feedback where they responded poorly or the moments when they use feedback most effectively.

## **2. Help students be proactive about how they ask for feedback.**

Stone and Heen point out that the feedback sequencing impacts how people react. They illustrate with a comparison of two softball players, Annie and Elsie, who receive the same advice on how to strengthen their swing. Although the two players get the pointers in the *same* style from the *same* coach, they respond differently. While Annie takes the advice as belief in her potential, Elsie sees it as a sign that the coach doesn't think she is any good.

Analyzing the feedback categories and subsequent responses can lead to self-discovery and improved communication. In Stone and Heen's example, Elsie, the discouraged player, recognized that she needed to know what was going well before she could reasonably contextualize feedback. Without such a frame, she saw the helpful feedback as harsh and dismissive. Annie, on the other hand, admitted that she might see a compliment as patronizing and doubt the coach's sincerity. She just wants him to provide direct guidance on to how to improve.

Students might have a bit of trouble analyzing the kind of feedback they prefer, but with practice they will become more perceptive to what motivates them and more open to receiving different types of feedback. When meeting one-on-one with students consider asking them to identify the order of feedback types they prefer. Students like Annie may know they feel more respected when a conference begins with direct pointers. Others, like Elsie, may figure out that they process coaching feedback with more ease once they receive credit for their successes.

## **3. Remind students which categories of feedback they'll get or give on projects or assignments.**

Although we hope our students can evaluate each type of feedback, reminders can make students better at getting and giving feedback. From peer review on essay drafts to group presentation feedback, we ask students to contribute in each of the three categories of feedback. When students self-assess, our questions align to the three categories. Here we change the evaluation category slightly to emphasize decision-making based upon feedback.

- **Appreciation:** Where were you most successful? What improvements stand out? What/Who deserves credit or affirmation?
- **Coaching:** How can knowledge expand? What skills need tweaked or fine-tuned? Where does effort need to be increased or reallocated?
- **Feed-forward:** What needs to change or stay the same to be successful? How does behavior need to change to align with desired outcomes? How can experience inform decision-making?

Although it takes a little work to teach students how to manage feedback, the results are worth it. Consider asking students to routinely use all three types of feedback to reflect on a recent learning experience.

The stakes are high in today's college classroom, and it's easy to let emotions take over. But it's worth teaching students to move past gut reactions. With a little practice, students can improve how they reflect on specific kinds of feedback. Taking time to analyze what feedback students want and how they react to it is mutually beneficial: students become better, more proactive stewards of their own feedback, while teachers learn what kinds of feedback work best. With a bit of work, we can orient students toward healthy, productive feedback use.

Reference: Stone, Douglas and Sheila Heen. *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

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