Feedback

High impact for very low cost, based on moderate evidence.

£ £ £ £ £   🔒 🔒 🔒 🔒 🔒   +8

Feedback is information given to the learner and/or the teacher about the learner's performance relative to learning goals. It should aim to (and be capable of) producing improvement in students' learning. Feedback redirects or refocuses either the teacher's or the learner's actions to achieve a goal, by aligning effort and activity with an outcome. It can be about the learning activity itself, about the process of activity, about the student's management of their learning or self-regulation or (the least effective) about them as individuals. This feedback can be verbal, written, or can be given through tests or via digital technology. It can come from a teacher or someone taking a teaching role, or from peers.

How effective is it?

Feedback studies tend to show very high effects on learning. However, it also has a very high range of effects and some studies show that feedback can have negative effects and make things worse. It is therefore important to understand the potential benefits and the possible limitations of the approach. In general, research-based approaches that explicitly aim to provide feedback to learners, such as Bloom's 'mastery learning', also tend to have a positive impact. Feedback has effects on all types of learning across all age groups. Research in schools has focused particularly on English, mathematics and, to a lesser extent, science.

Research evidence about feedback was part of the rationale for Assessment for Learning (AfL). One evaluation of AfL indicated an impact of half of a GCSE grade per student per subject is achievable, which would be in line with the wider evidence about feedback.

Other studies reporting lower impact indicate that it is challenging to make feedback work in the classroom. This has also been demonstrated in a recent EEF pilot study where teachers tried to apply the evidence on feedback through an action research approach.

How secure is the evidence?

There are a substantial number of reviews and meta-analyses of the effects of feedback. Educational (rather than psychological or theoretical) studies tend to identify positive benefits where the aim is to improve learning outcomes in reading or mathematics or in recall of information. The most recent meta-analysis of studies focusing on formative assessment in schools indicates the gains are more modest, suggesting an improvement of about three months' additional progress is achievable in schools or nearer four months' when the approach is supported with professional development.

What are the costs?

The costs of providing more effective feedback are not high. However it is likely to require sustained professional development to improve practice, and this includes active inquiry and evaluation. Overall, costs are estimated as under £80 per pupil and very low.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Providing effective feedback is challenging. Research suggests that it should be specific, accurate and clear (e.g. "It was good because you..." rather than just "correct"); compare what a learner is doing right now with what they have done wrong before (e.g. "I can see you were focused on improving X as it is much better than last time's Y…"); encourage and support further effort and be given sparingly so that it is meaningful; provide specific guidance on how to improve and not just tell students when they are wrong; and be supported with effective professional development for teachers.

2. Wider research suggests the feedback should be about complex or challenging tasks or goals as this is likely to emphasise the importance of effort and perseverance as well as be more valued by the pupils. Feedback can come from other peers as well as adults (see Peer tutoring).

3. Have you considered the challenge of implementing feedback effectively and consistently?

4. What professional development requirements are likely to be necessary for success?