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The Role of Feedback in Continuous Improvement in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is a critical component in fostering continuous improvement in schools, enhancing both teaching practices and student learning outcomes. This paper examines the role of feedback in educational settings, highlighting its importance in refining instructional strategies, improving student engagement, and ensuring accountability in performance assessment. Despite its recognized significance, challenges persist in effectively implementing feedback mechanisms due to issues such as student disengagement, ineffective feedback delivery, and the lack of clear tracking methods. Technological advancements provide new opportunities for enhancing feedback processes, allowing for real-time monitoring and personalized instruction. This study examines various feedback models, their impact on student performance, and the role of leadership in creating an environment that encourages constructive feedback. Additionally, case studies and empirical research are reviewed to determine best practices for utilizing feedback to drive continuous school improvement. The findings suggest that a structured, well-integrated feedback system significantly enhances educational outcomes, emphasizing the need for ongoing research and innovation in feedback methodologies.

Keywords: Feedback, Continuous Improvement, Student Engagement, Educational Assessment, Teacher Development, Instructional Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

For a long time I have been dissatisfied with the way student and teacher feedback and corrections were being handled in class. Teacher feedback and corrections had been paper based. They were written on a separate handout and students were expected to read it, apply the feedback and correct errors. Anecdotal evidence suggested that students seemed to neither read the feedback nor apply it. Upon questioning, students did not have a clear memory of seeing the feedback or corrections. Since the feedback and corrections were paper based and outside the task, the feedback and corrections could not be referred to. It was possible that students were indeed listening to the feedback but continuing to struggle with the task. If that was the case, it meant that a better way was needed of tracking student engagement with the feedback and corrections. Moreover, there were problems with the way student feedback was being handled. Providing corrections for every student was excessively time consuming and was neither a practical nor a scalable model. There was tracking software for the extent of student corrections that could be made; however, if more software was able to track student engagement, there was no clear mechanism to insure that students were engaging with the feedback. It became apparent that students were not engaging with the teacher feedback and corrections. Moreover, when students were applying the feedback, the correction process was still facilitated by the homework, meaning their application was still outside the closed task. In this teacher's class, students only received a grade and general teacher feedback for the written assessment task. With the accumulation of things that were not being done well with feedback and corrections, it was decided to focus on them for the improvement in student outcomes project [1, 2].

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Understanding Continuous Improvement

Continuous school improvement is a systematic way of planning, implementing, and evaluating indicator processes of improvement that have been tried in education for the past half-century. In the context of large educational institutions with multiple centers that may have diverse school improvement implementations, it is common to select indicators at the top level, but ultimately trace them down to lower levels. The implementation of improvement initiatives inevitably produces feedback data. Educator feedback must be addressed for these efforts to succeed. To make the best use of feedback data, consideration must be given to how it is collected, from whom it is collected, and to whom it is provided. To provide context for a new system assigned the task of implementing feedback cycles in an existing school improvement ecosystem, a system is detailed. Evaluation is very much the core of this system and is divided into two types of evaluations: a summative evaluation that will answer durability and design questions and an accumulative evaluation that will address the design question. The data flow system that has been built to support these evaluations is then described. This system has encountered a variety of issues and challenges logistically modeling, exporting, and importing the hierarchical physical, institutional data from the observational data, and the system results have been generalized, such that this system can benefit any large educational system contemplating the implementation or redesign of feedback cycles [3, 4].

The Importance of Feedback

The nature of feedback is commonly understood to be instrumental in, and even essential for, driving continuous school improvement, but more research is required on how, when, and why feedback is effective. Feedback was most likely given to students in the form of high-grades, instructions on what to do next, or encouragement to try harder. Despite numerous requests for feedback, it is possible that the students were listening to teacher feedback but were struggling with the task; therefore, finding a better way of tracking student engagement with feedback seemed necessary. It is probable that this effectiveness is a result of its responsiveness or a function of task difficulty, as without this scaffolding high-ability students may proceed to working on the same task. In reviewing annotated tasks, it was found that students were receiving the same feedback on assessments and the same feedback was routinely acting as a turning point, indicating that the task was too hard. These findings also suggest natural limits on how much easier future research might be: on very hard tasks students are unlikely to be systematically engaging with teacher feedback. While there was strong evidence that teacher feedback was being mixed by all students, this research also suggests more broadly that as they relate to their own work, students might be engaging with feedback on a particular point. Ongoing concerns with student achievement, the quality and usefulness of teacher feedback, mounting issues regarding student's literacy abilities, and the relative lack of engagement with feedback all serve to demonstrate a common issue of increasing significance [5, 6].

Feedback Mechanisms in Schools

It seems like a lot of tertiary educators are trying to fight the same problem: getting either constructive or helpful feedback out from their students. End-of-course evaluation scores showed that my students expected feedback on things including pedagogical style (too fast, too slow, etc.), their understanding of their homework + assessment tasks, and the physical resources available in class. At the same time, some educators were trying to encourage students to give more/better quality peer feedback in speaking courses, with mixed success. As updating research on oral feedback suggests that the most useful oral feedback is specific, directed to task performance competencies and goal setting, the research question becomes:

•What are the most effective materials and strategies for teaching students how to give specific, constructive and/or task-directed feedback?
• How can students track their progress in incorporating feedback into setting goals?
• How can teachers incorporate the feedback given to a student in formal assessment?
• Do any of these strategies encourage students to give feedback when they would not have previously given feedback or did not otherwise comment among their peers? [3, 1].

Implementing Feedback for Improvement

Feedback is a pervasive and necessary element of schooling. In classrooms, students are given feedback on their completed work in the form of grades and written comments. Teachers also frequently use oral feedback when working one-to-one with students. However, in many classrooms, the utilisation of this feedback for improvement is ad hoc at best. In particular, teachers typically do not ensure that students

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listen to feedback, and when students do request feedback this is often focussed on the comments themselves or directly repeating what the teacher has already told them. Teacher feedback is often unclear and/or impractical. It is not easy to recognise a good essay and excellent essay because the demarcation is vague or unclear. If a student is told their introduction is clearly focused, what does that mean for the body paragraphs. Also often the comments are not practically useful – e.g. focus more. But what does that mean in the context of providing timed writing in classroom? Most importantly, when feedback is not clear, it has little to no impact on student learning. This has been validated endlessly in the world of research. In addition, feedback comments are not always compatible with prior knowledge. This echoes the above problem of having a vague demarcation between various levels of performance. If a student is on the cusp of a B, how can they cross the divide without a clear understanding of what comprises a B level response? Comments are not always of logical form. For example, a student may be directed to vary their sentence structure and to write better topic sentences in the same comment. The relationship between the sentences will most likely be overlooked, which is the misuse of conjunctions. Feedback does not always point or cue to the same issues. Therefore, improvement in essay writing is attempted by investigating how effectively essay feedback is given and acted upon [7, 8].

Feedback and Student Outcomes

Feedback is one of the most effective ways to improve student achievement. However, feedback comes in many forms, and not all studies have defined it in the same way. The effectiveness of any feedback intervention has been found to depend on how it is defined and the context in which it is provided. The debate surrounding the effectiveness of feedback rarely addresses the possibility that educator perception of feedback may be determined by how it is defined. Examples of educational feedback include grades, elaborated written comments, and corrective suggestions, but there is a paucity of research examining how different types of educational feedback may impact student outcomes. Together, how feedback is perceived and the studied context affect its effectiveness and generalizability. Thus, it follows that there is a critical need for further research on feedback, particularly in the educational setting. Past research on feedback has largely centered on how it can improve student academic performance, usually operationalized as test scores. Some studies have found that feedback improves performance through an increase in motivation and/or self-efficacy. Although metacognition is suggested as the mechanism through which feedback improves performance, little research has been done to provide empirical support for this idea. Subsequently, almost none of this research has been conducted in the context of a high school history class. It is imperative that a feedback intervention be implemented and evaluated to determine whether such outcomes can be realized in a high school history class [9, 10].

Challenges In Providing Feedback

When teacher-facilitated discussions were provided as an activity and feedback was given to students, a number of challenges with encouraging accurate use was identified. A significant challenge was the different languages in which feedback was being provided: ensuring students understood both the content of the feedback and knew the meaning of all words was complicated. Students did have strategies to help them in checking understanding of words; however, it was observed that this tool was not always used effectively. In some pairs, it appeared that students had forgotten about this tool or were refusing to use it. For students who refused to use the tool, and yet still claimed to understand the feedback, it was apparent that a number of students would pronounce incorrect words correctly, which led the other student to believe they had knowledge of a word that they didn't beforehand. In addition, students tried to explain the feedback in their own words. Feedback had to use increasingly complex language to teach international students new words. It was challenging for these pairs to break out of patterns where one student always asked questions using the translation tool, while the other always checked understanding in their own words, indicating a lack of vocabulary [11, 12].

Case Studies

This paper presents a variety of real-life case studies that have been meticulously selected to clearly demonstrate how feedback is leveraged in diverse educational settings. These settings range widely from the collegiate classroom environments to a vast network that encompasses 40 schools, which consist of various operational systems. The case studies discussed herein are derived and compiled from the extensive Education Week Library, a reputable source for educational research and analysis. Some of the postings within these studies have been thoughtfully expanded upon, and they present a more comprehensive view that encapsulates both the significant benefits and the notable challenges faced by different sites as they utilize feedback mechanisms. For the enhanced version of this section, invaluable

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feedback from a meta-synthesis was incorporated, which has afforded us a more nuanced and longitudinal perspective on the profound impact that feedback can have on individual schools, tailoring specific recommendations for improvement. Instructional coaching has long been part of the fabric of American educational practices, particularly as a means to enhance teacher effectiveness. However, it is much less common for teachers to receive structured coaching focused specifically on the systematic utilization of data in their ongoing efforts to significantly boost student understanding and learning outcomes. In summation, this case study will describe such a dynamic setting within a large, urban school district, which has been at the forefront of innovation in education. This initiative is a multi-year project that began in the year 2007, specifically honing in on middle-school physical science instruction and pedagogical methods. However, the foundational story actually begins with the Consortium project initiated in 2001, which aimed to inspire and empower secondary school teachers to meaningfully integrate technology into their classes and, through that integration, energize and enhance pupil understanding and engagement with the learning material. Teacher "coaches" who were selected from each of the interested schools played a pivotal role in this initiative. These dedicated educators, often referred to as "padres," received essential materials and professional growth opportunities from a select teacher designated as the coach for the coaches. The initial feedback derived from these collaborative meetings was characterized as highly formal. Coaches would take the responsibility to pass on teachers' specific queries regarding the software tools being utilized, while training team members would engage with their inquiries, provide insights, and offer expertise to answer them comprehensively [13, 14].

Technological Tools for Feedback

The technological research of the past few years has shown that technology (both digital and not) can facilitate feedback in education. Mobile markers fitted to paper for instance, can facilitate the feedback process when they vibrate if marking criteria are met. That could possibly indicate to the assessor the border of where an academic criterion is or isn't met, hence potentially shading the target area. Digital technologies on the other hand, can provide automated feedback on an essay. Despite the evident influence of technology in Higher Education and as murmurings of technological unemployment bubble, the effective educational contribution of technology in teaching, including to feedback processes, is yet to be fully revealed. Since the rise of the educational technology movement unjustified claims have been made about the educational value of technologies. ICT has brought tools to manage and enhance the control and monitoring of feedback, thus a growing body of literature also agrees on the necessity of technology to manage and monitor feedback processes. Nevertheless, with the upcoming of technology-enhanced feedback processes, there is no consensus on how the feedback, whether formative or summative, should be designed or delivered. In contrast, research on technology-enhanced feedback is locatable by a brief count of fingers. It would seem plausible to think that there should be more conversations (and research) on the evaluation of what is an already too pervasive black box in academic practice. It is in this sense that a mobile web application is custom developed to provide feedback on submitted assignment outlines. It allows the user to drag and type comments on a copy of the outline image [15, 16]. Feedback is amongst the major contributors to quality education. However, it is also the cause of top-down concerns. It is recognised that feedback in high education is both laborious and difficult to get right. One might argue that it is more efficient to focus on other teaching strategies. This research has shown the potential of a method of feedback provision, facilitated by a technological app enhancement, to increase feedback acceptance by students. A limitation of this research is that only one cohort is surveyed. It is recommended that further research be conducted, analysing data over different iterative applications and in different academic contexts. It is also recommended that future research conduct comparative studies, checking for student feedback acceptance against different types of summative assessment, while controlling for similar feedback content [17, 18].

Role of Leadership in Feedback

Feedback is a key driving force in effective teacher organization. It may be classroom observation data from a coach, evaluator, or from the teacher's own videotaped lessons. This feedback may be critical or praise. If the focus is on working with a thought-partner, facilitated feedback is provided through this partnership. Attempts to improve talking effectively to students may take place the day after students were last talked to. Considering the increase in social and economic expectations for the public school industry, many schools in the United States are not meeting the annual state learning requirements. There has been an increasing demand that school districts need to progress as a means of perpetrating better student achievement. Despite this, the improvement has not occurred since the federal mandate

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was implemented. Therefore, public schools must look inside their organizations to evaluate what is not happening in order to move forward. Attention must be turned to school organization since this is the place where all parts of the industry converge, but more specifically the role of leadership. A strategic look taken about the internal characteristics leads to considering continuous improvement, which is a formal assessment carried out by faculty. As general career choices have changed with the pass of time, so too has the perception of working for specific organizations emanated. During the economic times, employees' thoughts were largely on their take-home pay and not especially oriented on the conditions of their bosses and the making of work. As we have experienced the industrialization of late and now a post-industrial economy, thoughts have shifted. Good pay is still important but now workers also are interested in how they like their bosses [19, 20].

Feedback In Professional Development

One of the most effective ways to improve teaching practices is to get consistent feedback about your work. This feedback can come in many forms, such as written comments from a school leader after an observation, suggestions that appear in a self-study book about teaching, or recurrent income from a coach. Professional Development (PD) initiatives will often have feedback as part of the overall design because feedback has the power to identify the specific areas that require improvement, assign an expert who can guide growth in those areas, and create a loop that allows for iterative improvements in instructional quality. As powerful as it is, feedback is a surprisingly underutilized tool in the toolkit of educators. However, benefit is still great if feedback is used properly. The goal of this paper is to provide an understanding of how educators can use feedback to improve their practices. This description starts with the ways that feedback can be old and used in professional development, moves on to useful tools for receiving feedback at greatly different levels of associated now-how, and then describes a decade-long line of inquiry about how performance on teaching's aptest tests is related to feedback about practices. Importance of feedback and continuous improvement. The quick path is experimentation. Try a new practice, and a teacher naturally feels the impacts on students and on-going teaching. However useful, the most powerful insights from this casual use of feedback will have an intention to ask, "Did the practice work, or not?" Try as someone may to control for differences between and among students, instruction, and the educational setting, a too-simple "Did it work?" question will never be acceptable to a scientist, who craves to know in what specific ways a practice is working or not working. Moreover, the continuous improvement of teaching practice requires a consistent, constantly updated portfolio of highly granular information about instructional quality [21, 22].

Future Directions for Feedback in Schools

While substantial progress has been made in the knowledge base regarding feedback, allusions to feedback overlook often-neglected empirical evidence about what works, what does not, and what variables matter overall. A comprehensive account of what feedback is and what it might achieve remains elusive. In addition, examinational feedback is often viewed in monolithic or overly broad terms, making it difficult to address or implement feedback effectively in practice. However, beyond its recommendations, a large amount of evidence is available on feedback in general; this is vital to ensure that practices described and advocated are research based. This research needs to encompass feedback across subjects, ages, stakeholders, and scales, as feedback is necessarily complex, multi-dimensional, and part of a wider and contestable ideology. Instead of highlighting the evidence that does exist, many researchers rely on a priori views of feedback, which may also be under-developed or arrive under-informed. As an alternative, the evidence regarding feedback will be drawn together in one place, summarising work that has found support for specific types of intervention and/or variables that typically have an influence on the efficacy of an intervention. It is hoped that this summary will offer a more complete and realistic understanding of feedback, making it accessible to a wider audience, such as teachers, policymakers, and other researchers. While the evidence base is rarely either definitive or comprehensive on any educational issue, it is important that any moves to operationalise feedback be as rigorously evidence based as possible (even if, as is so often the case, research in this area is contradictory, limited and/or contentious) [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Feedback serves as a cornerstone for continuous improvement in educational settings, shaping teaching methodologies and student learning experiences. The findings of this study highlight the need for more effective, structured, and technology-enhanced feedback mechanisms that actively engage students and support their academic progress. Challenges such as unclear feedback, lack of student engagement, and

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ineffective tracking systems underscore the necessity for a more systematic approach to feedback implementation. The role of leadership in fostering a feedback-driven culture is paramount, ensuring that teachers and students alike benefit from meaningful, actionable insights. Future research should focus on refining feedback methodologies, integrating technological solutions, and examining long-term impacts on student achievement. By prioritizing constructive and well-implemented feedback systems, schools can foster an environment of continuous learning and academic excellence.

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