

Learning from Feedback

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You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

When I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a 15-year-old, these words made a deep impression on me. I often wondered what the world looked like through another person's eyes. The cobbler at the street corner, the peanut vendor at the bus stop, the Principal on the podium: What did the world seem like to them? Sitting in a boring afternoon class, I wondered if my teacher ever stepped into her students' shoes. If she could see the class through my eyes, would something change? Would she liven up the class with some humour? Would she give us less homework? Would she talk less, and let us talk more? When I began to teach, I found that looking at things from a student's point of view made teaching more interesting and more fun. I also think it made me a better teacher. There are different ways in which we can understand our students' viewpoints. In this article I explore how written feedback questionnaires can be useful in gathering students' perspectives to improve teaching and learning. The article describes some ways we can collect, interpret and respond to feedback. What is feedback? The dictionary defines feedback as 'the process by which a system is modulated, controlled, or changed by the product, output, or response it produces'. As

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As teachers we are constantly giving our students feedback. Corrections in the notebook, suggestions in the class or reminders in the corridor are all forms of feedback. As teachers we believe (and sometimes hope!) that our feedback is having a positive effect on our students' learning. Feedback is a way for us to communicate our viewpoints and concerns to students. As teachers we also get feedback constantly. Feedback from students helps us to modulate or change the way we teach. The expressions on students' faces, the questions they ask and their written work are all forms of student feedback. Feedback of this kind is very useful, though it is sometimes difficult to interpret correctly. Do the yawns mean that the lesson is boring or that the students were up late at night? A direct way of understanding students' viewpoints and concerns is to ask them. Written questionnaires are a systematic way to gather feedback from students. We can choose what to focus on in a feedback questionnaire. We can find out students' perceptions of what they are learning. We can get feedback on our teaching practices. How and when to get written feedback Written feedback can be taken in the middle of a term, while there are still opportunities to make changes to what and how we teach. Student responses can help us identify what they find helpful as well as what they find difficult. It also helps us to understand the concerns of those students who would otherwise hesitate to communicate openly. Written feedback can also be taken at the end of a course, when it provides us with inputs to plan for the future. This works well with both young

students in primary school as well as older ones in high school. Of course, the questionnaires need to be prepared in an age-appropriate way. Written feedback can be gathered in 10 to 15 minutes of class time. Students need to be assured of anonymity so that they are frank in their opinions. It's also useful to tell students the purpose of the feedback. 'Your responses on this questionnaire will help me review my work as well as yours,' is a statement that I often prefix to the questionnaires I use. There are many possible questions we could ask, depending on which aspects of teaching and learning we want to focus on. There are two main categories of questions that I find useful. The first category includes questions

about teaching practices. The second category includes questions that encourage students to reflect on their own learning. Questions about teaching practice This category could include questions on the use of the blackboard, the language we use in the classroom and the way we handle students' questions. I learn what is working well in my teaching from student responses to these questions. I also discover areas that need improvement. The very act of posing these questions makes me more aware of what and how I am communicating in the classroom. Here is a sample of feedback I request from students in this area: Please respond to these statements about the teaching in science classes this year. Tick in the box which matches your opinion the best. If you have any comments or suggestions you can write them in the last column.

(Table)

Student responses have often highlighted areas where I can improve my effectiveness. Here are a few examples of comments and suggestions that I have received from students, which have pushed me to look for ways to improve my teaching. Akka, maybe you could go to drawing classes. Some of your drawings on the blackboard are difficult to understand. I have focused on making diagrams and illustrations on the blackboard simpler and clearer. I also make it a point to practise any new drawings before I attempt them on the board. You spend too much time on giving instructions for lab work. That's really boring. I think about what I really need to say to students before lab work. I have replaced lengthy instructions with colourful posters, which I use to remind students about lab rules. I encourage students to read and follow written instructions independently. I feel sleepy in the afternoon classes. We could have more outdoor activities in the afternoon. Field trips, quizzes in class, project work are scheduled for those sleepy times whenever possible. Your feedback in my notebook really helped me. This encourages me to continue giving fairly detailed written feedback in students' notebooks even though it means spending extra time. Questions about students learning The second category of question reveals students' perceptions about what they are learning. These include questions about what students found difficult in class, what they found valuable and so on. Here are some sample questions that helped me understand students' concerns: What are the most significant things you have learnt in Science class this year? What do you think you could have done better? Complete this sentence to describe how you feel about science. 'Science is _____'. What did you enjoy the most about Maths classes? What did you like the least about Maths classes? I have found such questions useful in two ways. Firstly, students' answers tell me what is working and what is not. I get a sense of the difficulties students may be facing. I also get a sense of what enthuses them.

The second benefit is to students themselves. Students get a chance to reflect on their own learning. Student responses can be a starting point for further discussions on what and how they learn. Here

are some sample responses from middle school students: I like doing Maths problems when I am getting the answers. I think I could have coordinated better with my group members. I should have taken more detailed notes in class. I learnt to raise my hand and wait for my turn to speak. I hate working in a group. I think we should be allowed to work alone. The most significant things I learnt were to ask questions and how to work in a group. I learnt a lot about plants. Responding to student feedback It's nice when students give positive feedback. But students, if they are honest, are not always going to say what we want to hear. Students may give feedback that we do not agree with. Some of it might make us feel hurt, angry or resentful. It's important to acknowledge these feelings and yet go beyond them. Being open to student feedback is vital, whether it seems positive or negative. A certain sense of objectivity and detachment helps when responding to feedback. I find it useful to ask myself: What can I learn from this perspective? Feedback is not the same as praise or criticism; its purpose is to help us improve teaching and learning. The first step in responding to student feedback is to acknowledge it promptly. Acknowledging both positive and negative feedback tells students that we take them seriously and are open to their opinions. Acting on it is the next step, but responding does not mean that we have to implement every suggestion. There may be some aspects of the feedback that we may choose not to act on. Some suggestions may be inappropriate or difficult to carry out. It's important to communicate to students why we choose not to act on such feedback. We can also communicate the specific changes we choose to make in response to student feedback. Our response to feedback can also be an opportunity to clarify our own expectations for the class. It can create a space where we can dialogue with students about their expectations and learning.

Conclusion If we want our students to learn from each other and be open to our suggestions we need to show how it is done. When we seek and respond to feedback in an open way, we model for students how to learn from another's views and opinions. We communicate that learning is a process shared by both students and teachers. Listening to students gives us many opportunities to learn: about ourselves, about our students and about the world. A teacher who establishes rapport with the taught, becomes one with them, learns more from them than he teaches them.

...Whenever I talk with someone I learn from him. I take from him more than I give him. In this way, a true teacher regards himself as a student of his students. If you will teach your pupils with this attitude, you will benefit much from them. M K Gandhi, Talk to KhadiVidyalaya Students, Sevagram. HarijanSeva, 15th February 1942