



FEED-FORWARD, NOT JUST FEED-BACK: TRANSFORMING HOW WE GUIDE TRAINEE LEARNING

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Abstract

Classroom Teaching is essentially a continuous cycle of giving responses. Throughout the day, we guide trainees on improving their assignments, acknowledge what they're doing right, fix their mistakes, and redirect behaviors that hinder learning. This isn't limited to trainees alone—we exchange opinions with colleagues too, though perhaps not as frequently or openly as needed. We're also on the receiving end—getting input from trainees, parents, administrators, and peers. We encourage peer-to-peer evaluation among trainees as well, though results vary considerably.

The entire school experience can be viewed as an extended dialogue aimed at improvement, where individuals gather daily with growth as their goal while others help them achieve it. Unfortunately, this doesn't always work smoothly. During these exchanges, people become defensive, emotions get bruised, and the desired improvements often fail to materialize because the guidance isn't delivered in a manner that recipients can embrace.

Interestingly, there's an alternative approach that proves far more effective: redirecting focus from what has already happened to what lies ahead. This concept, known as "feedforward," was pioneered by management consultant Marshall Goldsmith. From what I've observed, relatively few educators seem familiar with feedforward practices, yet I'm convinced that widespread adoption of this method could dramatically transform both trainee development and our professional growth.

Keywords: *feedback, feed-forward, visible learning, self-regulated learning, assessment for learning, teacher practice*

Introduction

Among the various factors influencing trainee achievement, feedback stands out as particularly powerful. However, much of what teachers currently provide tends to be descriptive commentary rather than guidance trainees can actually act upon. Drawing from Hattie and Timperley's 2007 framework involving feed-up, feed-back, and feed-forward, this article argues for a deliberate transition away from predominantly feed-back approaches—which simply inform trainees about their current performance level—toward feed-forward methods that clarify the next steps in their learning journey. I'll share practical techniques to help teachers deliver timely, precise, and actionable



guidance that enables trainees to bridge performance gaps while developing self-regulatory learning capabilities. Learning gains momentum when feedback transforms from being a performance report into a navigation tool.

Delivering effective guidance represents a fundamental teaching skill. While feedback significantly impacts trainees' learning outcomes and performance quality, not all forms carry equal value. Research actually shows that how educators frame their responses—whether emphasizing "feed-up," "feed-back," or "feed-forward"—directly affects their usefulness (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This paper examines why shifting toward a feed-forward model maximizes impact on trainee growth and achievement.

Understanding Three Distinct Types of Feedback

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), educators typically provide three main categories of feedback:

Feed-up: Clarifies learning targets and success indicators

Feed-back: Reports on current achievement levels

Feed-forward: Recommends specific next steps for improvement

While each serves its purpose, research indicates feed-forward may be the most impactful for driving trainee learning. For instance, Brooks and colleagues (2019) examined feedback patterns in upper elementary classrooms and discovered that feed-back comments—addressing "how am I doing?"—were most prevalent, accounting for half of all feedback given. In contrast, feed-forward comments (addressing "where should I go next?") represented merely 19% of total feedback provided.

Why Feed-Forward Makes Such a Difference

What makes feed-forward feedback particularly effective? As Hattie and Timperley (2007) explain, the crucial distinction lies in whether feedback addresses the task itself, how the task is processed, self-regulation aspects, or personal characteristics. These distinctions matter tremendously for both effectiveness and where they direct the learner's attention (p. 93).

Feed-forward guidance points trainees toward their next improvement steps. It activates them as learners, demanding cognitive complexity and self-regulatory engagement. Research by Mandouit (2020) revealed that trainees highly appreciate feedback helping them "develop their ideas further" and understand "improvement pathways." Trainees seek guidance that not only enhances current work but also develops transferable capabilities applicable to future assignments and different contexts.

What distinguishes powerful feed-forward feedback is its inclusion of action points tailored to individual trainee needs and current achievement levels. As Hattie (2012) noted, the goal is providing feedback that's "perfectly timed," "personally relevant," "matched to my learning stage," and bridges the gap between current position and intended destination (p. 128). More broadly, feed-forward aligns with assessment for



learning philosophy rather than merely assessment of learning (Earl, 2013). It reframes assessment from being a judgment about achievement into an opportunity for continued growth. Trainees begin viewing learning as an ongoing journey rather than isolated performances.

Practical Implementation Strategies

- How can educators incorporate more feed-forward feedback into daily teaching? Consider these effective approaches:
- When reviewing trainee work, resist focusing solely on identifying strengths and weaknesses. Balance evaluative comments with specific, actionable improvement recommendations.
- Make success criteria explicit beforehand so trainees understand their targets. Verify trainee comprehension of goals before providing feedforward suggestions linked to those criteria.
- Invite trainees to self-reflect first; then build upon areas they identify for growth rather than imposing unsolicited direction.
- Concentrate feed-forward comments on the 1-2 most critical improvement priorities rather than overwhelming trainees with exhaustive lists of every possible area needing attention. Help trainees identify high-impact skills deserving their focus.
- Supplement written comments with individual conferences. Conversations enable instructional scaffolding, misunderstanding clarification, and verification that trainees grasp their next steps.
- Transitioning from feed-back to feed-forward necessitates reconsidering the educator's role. Teachers become not merely work evaluators but learning collaborators—partners in constructing shared understanding about current position, desired destination, and the path connecting them.
- Research clearly demonstrates that high-quality feed-forward feedback can substantially enhance trainee learning and growth. In Earl's words, "Trainees need information, not evaluation" (2013, p. 88). Educators should shift from feedback as praise, criticism, or correction toward focused guidance enabling trainee action.
- By emphasizing the craft of creating feed-forward feedback, educators can fulfill their essential role in promoting continuous improvement for all learners.

Fundamental Challenges with Traditional Feedback

Despite its widespread acceptance and popularity, traditional feedback has inherent limitations. Understanding these challenges is critical for improving effectiveness. Here are common problems within feedback systems:



1. One-Directional Communication

Traditional feedback often functions as one-way communication, allowing no exchange of perspectives. With minimal room for discussion or clarification, this lack of dialogue may cause receivers to misunderstand the intended message.

2. Insufficient Specificity

Vague feedback hinders understanding about which behaviors or actions require attention. Recipients struggle implementing feedback effectively when it lacks precision. Generic statements like "You need improvement" or "This could be better" prove ineffective due to unclear direction and, critically, missing specificity.

3. Timing Delays

Delayed feedback loses effectiveness. Unless provided close to the event, people may forget contextual details, making it harder to learn from experience and apply corrections promptly.

4. Resistance to Change

Feedback often encounters status quo bias—recipients' reluctance to modify established habits or practices. This sometimes stems from failure anxiety or unwillingness to challenge existing beliefs.

5. Absent Follow-Through

Feedback frequently fails due to lacking ongoing support and guidance after initial delivery. Without proper follow-up, meaningful improvement becomes unlikely.

6. Emotional Impact

Poorly delivered feedback can exact an emotional toll. Harsh criticism or insensitive remarks may damage relationships and create hostile atmospheres.

Will Feedforward Replace Feedback?

The feedback versus feedforward debate has gained considerable attention recently. While both serve different purposes, the question remains: will feedforward eventually supplant feedback in creating better learning cultures?

Feedback continues providing valuable insights. However, feedforward presents a compelling alternative by offering guidance and suggestions before action occurs. This approach fosters proactive problem-solving cultures and continuous learning mindsets, closely aligning with modern educational demands that value agility and adaptability.

Complete replacement seems unlikely, though. Feedback provides valuable information about past performance, helping trainees understand strengths and areas requiring improvement. However, combining feedback and feedforward creates a powerful synergy. Trainees gain balanced perspectives—looking backward and forward simultaneously. The optimal approach effectively balances both.



Why is feedback important?

Feedback has been known to be an important part of the learning process. Especially when coupled with deliberate practice, feedback can help trainees spend their time mastering aspects that they need to focus on most rather than practicing what they already know. Effective feedback works as a map to guide trainees by letting them know where they are now and what to work on in order to get to their goal. Without good feedback, trainees may carry misconceptions that they did not even realize they had while learning the material and walk aimlessly towards a goal without being sure how they can get there.

What constitutes effective feedback?

Effective feedback is:

- 1) targeted,
- 2) communicates progress,
- 3) timely, and
- 4) givestrainees the opportunity to practice and implement the feedback received. In a broader sense, these aspects relate to thinking about where the trainee is going, how the trainee is doing now, and what the next step is.

Targeted feedback

When giving feedback, it is important to make sure that it is specific and linked to clearly articulated goals or learning outcomes. Targeted feedback gives trainees an idea of what they did well and how they can improve in relation to the learning criteria stated in the course. Connecting feedback to specific and achievable goals helps provide trainees with an understanding of desired outcomes and sub goals as well. Additionally, goals should not be too challenging or too easy; goals that are too challenging can discourage trainees and make them feel unable to succeed, while goals that are too easy may not appropriately push trainees to improve and also provide them with unrealistic expectations of success.

Targeted feedback also includes prioritizing feedback – in other words, it is important not to overwhelm trainees with too many comments. Research has shown that even minimal feedback on trainees' writing can lead to an improved second draft, especially in the early stages, because it lets trainees know if they are on the right track and whether readers understand their message. To implement this, you may consider setting up milestones in order to break up a class project or paper and provide feedback to trainees along the way.

Communicates progress

Feedback showing how far a trainee has come can help by providing trainees with information on how much they have improved and where they should direct more attention to. Studies have shown that formative, process-oriented feedback that is focused on accomplishments is more effective than summative feedback, such as letter grades,



and also leads to greater interest in the class material. One strategy to consider may be providing specific comments on trainee work without a letter or number grade; trainees tend to fixate on such summative feedback, and studies have shown that providing both feedback and a grade actually negates the benefits of the given feedback.

Opportunity to practice

Simply giving targeted feedback will not be effective if trainees are not also given the chance to practice and put this feedback into place. Targeted feedback helps direct trainees' efforts to focus on how they should move forward for the future, but practice allows trainees to actually learn from feedback by applying it. Otherwise, there is the potential for trainees to not actually digest the feedback even if they willingly received it. Some ways to link practice with targeted feedback are to have a series of related assignments where trainees are asked to incorporate feedback into each subsequent assignment, or create sub-goals within projects where trainees receive feedback on rough drafts along the way and are specifically given a goal to address the feedback in final drafts. Regardless of the nature of the assignment, the key part is that trainees be given the opportunity to implement the feedback they are given in related class assignments.

Timing of feedback

It is also important that feedback be timely. Generally, immediate feedback and more frequent feedback is often best so that trainees are on track for their goals, but timely feedback may not necessarily be given right away. The timing of feedback largely depends on the learning goals – immediate feedback is better when trainees are learning new knowledge, but slightly delayed feedback can actually be helpful when trainees are applying learned knowledge. In particular, if the learning goal of an assignment is for trainees to be able to not only master a skill but also recognize their own errors, then delayed feedback would be the most appropriate because it allows trainees to think about their mistakes and have the chance to catch their errors rather than relying on feedback to tell them.

For STEM classes, immediate feedback may include in-class concept questions where trainees can know right away whether they have understood the new material that they just learned, while delayed feedback would include a problem set where they have to apply these learned concepts and wait before receiving feedback. For non-STEM classes, immediate feedback may include an in-class discussion, where trainees can hear feedback and thoughts on their ideas in real time, while an example of delayed feedback would be an essay, where trainees have to apply what they have learned in class to their writing and do not receive feedback on their submission right away.



Strategies to implement feedback in the classroom

As an instructor, you may not always have the time to provide feedback the way you would like to. The following strategies offer some suggestions for how you can still efficiently provide trainees with useful feedback.

Look for common errors among the classroom

You may notice common errors or misconceptions among the classrooms while grading exams, or realize that many trainees ask a similar question at office hours. If you take note of these common mistakes, you can then address them to the class as a whole. This can have the added benefit of making trainees feel less alone, as some may not realize that the mistake they made is a common one among their peers.

Prioritize feedback

As mentioned earlier, it can be helpful even to provide minimal feedback on a rough draft to steer trainees in the right direction. Often, it might not be necessary to provide feedback on all aspects of an assignment and doing so may actually overwhelm trainees with feedback. Instead, think about what would be most important to provide feedback on at this time – you may consider providing feedback on one area at a time, such as one step of crafting an argument or one step of solving a problem. Be sure to communicate with trainees which areas you did/did not provide feedback on.

Incorporate real-time group feedback.

Many feedback strategies appear more feasible for small classes, but this method is particularly useful in large lecture classes. Clicker questions are a common example of real time group feedback. It can be particularly difficult in larger classes to gain a good picture of trainee comprehension, so real-time feedback through clicker questions and polls can allow you to check in with the class. For instance, if you notice there are a large proportion of incorrect answers, you can think about how to present the material in a different way or have trainees discuss the problem together before re-polling.

Utilize peer feedback

It may not be logistically feasible for you to provide feedback to your trainees as often as you wish. Consider what opportunities for peer feedback may exist in your subject. For example, trainees could provide each other with immediate, informal feedback in-class using techniques such as “Think-Pair” where each trainee has had time to first grapple with a concept or a problem individually and then is asked to explain the concept or problem solving approach to each other. Using peer feedback allows trainees to learn from each other while also preventing you from getting overwhelmed with constantly having to provide feedback as the instructor. Peer feedback can be just as valuable as instructor feedback when trainees are clear on the purpose of peer feedback and how they can effectively engage in it. One way to create successful peer feedback, particularly for more substantial assignments, is to provide trainees with a rubric and an example that is



evaluated based on the rubric. This makes it clear to trainees what they should be looking for when conducting peer feedback, and what constitutes a successful or unsuccessful end result.

Create opportunities for trainees to reflect on feedback

By reflecting on how they will implement the feedback they have received, trainees are able to actively interact with the feedback and connect it to their work. For example, if trainees have a class project divided into milestones, you may ask trainees to write a few sentences about how they used the comments they received and how it impacted the subsequent assignment.

Conclusion

Consider telling a trainee, "Your essay lacked organization and contained numerous spelling errors." That's feedback about something already completed—like asking someone to escape from concrete that's already hardened. The paper's been submitted, the grade recorded, and nothing can change the past. The trainee feels discouraged without knowing what to do differently next time. As Joe Hirsch explains in *The Feedback Fix*, traditional feedback often fixates on mistakes that can't be corrected anymore.

Feed-forward differs fundamentally. Rather than examining what went wrong, it looks ahead, answering the question every trainee genuinely wants answered: "Teacher, what should I do in my next assignment to improve?"

As future educators, you possess the power to transform lives with carefully chosen words:

- Instead of simply writing "Weak conclusion," try: "Next time, end your essay by addressing the 'So what?' question—explain to readers why your topic matters to them."
- Instead of noting "More analysis needed," write: "In your next paragraph, after presenting each piece of evidence, ask yourself 'What does this evidence reveal?' and write one sentence answering that."
- When you provide feed-forward, each assignment becomes a stepping stone rather than a final verdict. Your trainees will leave your classroom not just knowing what they did wrong but carrying clear, practical strategies they can use throughout their lives.
- Remember: your red pen, or your voice, ranks among the most powerful teaching tools you'll ever hold. Use it not merely to evaluate the past but to construct a brighter future—one actionable "next step" at a time. That's the kind of teacher tomorrow's children need—and the kind of teacher you're training to become.



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