



Taking Lessons From Learners: Student Feedback In Education

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By Ray McNulty, President, International Center for Leadership in Education

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Teacher, grade thyself! Such a challenge would likely inspire fear in many teachers. Deciding what criteria to use to guide such a self-evaluation would be daunting, and I bet one invaluable criterion would not make many lists: student feedback.

Feedback is at the core of the competitive business model. It is part of a formative process (feedback that leads to reflection, then changes). These days, I have barely paid my restaurant check or stepped away from the airport baggage claim before I get a text or e-mail asking me to rate my meal or flight. When I shop online, I am invited to take an exit survey. Consumer feedback opportunities are everywhere; smart businesses use feedback to figure out how they are doing, fix things that are wrong, find new ideas, and build better relationships. Why don't schools and teachers use it, too?

Unfortunately, student feedback is often regarded with skepticism, if it is considered at all. Students are education's primary consumers. Yet, rarely are they asked to weigh in about their experiences. When collected anonymously and applied wisely, however, feedback from students can be a priceless tool.

More and more schools are using formative student assessments to track progress throughout the year and make adjustments to instruction as needed. I'd argue that student feedback should be a key component of a teacher's ongoing formative assessment process.

The online iKnow My Class Survey—developed by Aspirations Unlimited International, the Successful Practices Network, and the Student Engagement Trust—is an example of a tool that creates a forum for students to share frequent, anonymous feedback with their teachers. Some surveys help schools measure their overall progress or standing, but iKnow generates teacher-specific data that educators can use immediately to make mid-course adjustments or, in the longer term, to identify professional development needs. (For more information visit: www.successfulpractices.org)

Teachers who use iKnow are often surprised at what they learn from their

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feedback > reflection > change.

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students. A teacher at California's La Quinta High School, which is renown as a "model" school, gushed that the conversation she had with her students after reviewing iKnow feedback was "AMAZING!" The discussion highlighted how easy it is for misunderstandings to arise, however.

When asked if the teacher communicated with them and their parents, the students overwhelmingly responded negatively. The teacher was shocked: "I felt that by keeping my grades current in e-school [24 hour grading and posting], updating a website with daily activities, and sending home printed progress reports and grade reports, I was communicating really well with parents and students. But the data from students said I rarely communicated!" It turned out that the students interpreted the question of "communication" through the lens of whether the teacher had contacted parents about disciplinary issues! Imagine the difficulty students must have in grasping content when semantics can lead to unchecked confusion.

Blind feedback encourages students to communicate honestly about their experiences and allows teachers to tweak content and methodology at a point when such adjustments are still meaningful to the students. Clearer communication, stronger relationships, trust, and self-reflection combine to support a powerful and continuous feedback loop in which all members of the school community learn how to give, take, and use constructive feedback to maximize the education experience.

We spend millions of dollars and countless hours developing student assessment models. The intense focus on this kind of testing has lulled us into believing that quantitative data—assessment results—provides a complete measure of educational success. And quantitative data is valuable for evaluating certain aspects of education, but it does not reveal the full spectrum of factors that, when combined, form a meaningful, quality educational experience for students. Qualitative data—about relationships, opportunities, and communication—is also essential.

Yes, a singular focus on academics will yield results—but they may be temporary. In a school in which respect, relationships, trust, and communication are at the forefront, academic performance follows. Student feedback is a gateway into creating such a culture.

When I talk about student feedback, I often hear two responses from educators. One is: "Students will use feedback to get back at us." I always have to ask why a teacher is feeling such anxiety! No one wants to hear that students think the "interesting" project you've planned is boring, for instance. But it takes courage to hear that feedback, self-evaluate, and make a change. This process becomes an opportunity not only to improve one's teaching, but also an opportunity to model the value of lifelong learning.

This is the essence of a true formative process that honors and respects feedback and teacher observations as key components in the process that builds educators' self-directed learning and improves learner achievement.

The second response I hear is, "What do my students know about my teaching?" I am not a chef, but I can tell you about the food. As everyday citizens of their classrooms, students are well qualified to recognize good teaching. The more important question for educators might be, "What do you think you know and what do you really know about what your students know about your teaching?"

A learner's perspective is different from that of a professional educator. There is more to teaching than technical ability. An educator who sets out to evaluate a colleague may note a beautiful instructional transition or praise careful planning—and give the teacher high marks for performance. But if a student in that classroom misses the point of the lesson, then the teacher has been successful in schooling, but not in teaching. Think of student feedback as one half of a stereo experience: You can get a feel for the music with only one ear bud in, but the experience is so much richer when you listen through both.

Student feedback is an essential criterion for teachers to evaluate themselves and to be evaluated by others. But they must invite students to share it—honestly, without fear of retribution—and then consider it, use it, and try to improve on it once it is available. The customer's voice should always be valued.

What do you think you know and what do you really know about what your students know about your teaching?