

Reimagining classroom assessment and feedback to meet learner needs

Dr Fabienne Van der Kleij

Australian Council for Educational Research

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Dr Fabienne Van der Kleij is a Research Fellow at ACER. She leads ACER's research work in school and system improvement at the Centre for School and System Improvement. Her presentation will be based on her work as Research Fellow at The University of Queensland and Australian Catholic University, where she conducted research into classroom assessment and teacher and school leader professional learning in feedback to improve student learning. Fabienne's main research interests are educational assessment, school improvement, and feedback. Her most recent research has focused on teacher and student perceptions of classroom assessment feedback, student engagement with feedback, and assessment for learning in classroom practice.

Abstract

The power of classroom assessment and feedback to improve student learning outcomes has long been recognised. Yet, decades of research have yielded disappointing and often conflicting outcomes. This presentation challenges traditional conceptions of classroom assessment and feedback as teacher-driven practices. To meet learner needs better, it proposes a student-centred perspective in which students are active and have agency. By drawing on an extensive study of feedback reviews, this presentation illustrates how conceptualisations of feedback have changed over recent decades. This paper provides key insights into how classroom assessment and feedback practices can be changed in ways that are sustainable, afford student agency, and enhance student learning outcomes. Key learnings from recent research in primary and secondary education contexts are synthesised to provide state-of-the-art insights for shaping policy, practice and future research.

Introduction

The power of classroom assessment and feedback to improve student learning outcomes has long been recognised (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Whereas classroom assessment can pinpoint how students are going in relation to a particular goal, feedback is a critical vehicle to suggest next steps for improvement. As such, feedback is crucial in paving the way forward.

Despite its evidence-based potential, the effects of feedback on student learning in classroom assessment are often disappointing (e.g. Shute, 2008). Moreover, the effects of the same feedback on different students' learning outcomes are highly variable (Lipnevich et al., 2016). This suggests that individual students have different feedback needs, and assessment and feedback often do not meet these needs.

Classroom assessment is often constructed as something teachers undertake, with limited consideration of student roles (Hargreaves, 2012; Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Van der Kleij et al., 2019). Similarly, much of the feedback research has focused on identifying teacher-provided feedback that is generally effective for most students without considering how individual students respond to and act on feedback, and their agency in this process (Van der Kleij et al., 2017; 2019). Feedback can only enhance student learning if it is meaningfully embedded in classroom assessment practices and

students can use it in a productive way. Unfortunately, research shows that there are many potential barriers to effective feedback use. For example, students may not recognise feedback, may not understand it, may not perceive it as useful, or may not have the opportunity, ability or motivation to act on it (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Van der Kleij, 2019; Van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021).

It is obvious that if we are to realise the power of classroom assessment and feedback, we need to reimagine classroom assessment and feedback in a way that meets learner needs. To begin to understand what this might look like, this article synthesises evidence-based findings from recent research in primary and secondary education contexts.

The purpose of feedback and role of the student

Feedback can take many different forms, and can be written, oral, or nonverbal communication. Research suggests that students do not necessarily recognise all such forms of feedback provided by teachers (e.g. Van der Kleij, 2019; 2021). Having conversations *about* what feedback is and its purpose can help students recognise and appreciate teacher feedback, and can clarify expectations and prevent miscommunications. When teachers make explicit their expectations for students to take an active role in feedback, the students are more likely to feel empowered (Van der Kleij et al., 2017).

Research suggests that students have different ideas about the purposes of feedback (Van der Kleij, 2021). For example, some students may regard feedback as corrective information and praise, whereas others identify feedback as taking place in any interaction with their teacher in which information is exchanged and common understandings are shaped. These differing perceptions of feedback are underpinned by students' perceived roles of themselves and the teacher in the feedback process. For example, some students see themselves as receivers of feedback, and teachers as providers (Van der Kleij, 2021). In contrast, students may see themselves as having an active role in assessing their own or their peers' progress, seeking clarification or further feedback, or provide feedback to themselves, peers and the teacher (Brooks et al., 2021b; Van der Kleij, 2021).

A recent study of feedback reviews published over the past 50 years (Van der Kleij et al., 2019) examined how the role of the student in feedback processes has been conceptualised. Key results are summarised in Table 1. The findings showed that although reviews have evolved towards a student-centred perspective (communication and dialogic models), the information processing model of feedback in which students have a limited role is still driving thinking in the field.

Table 1 Four models of feedback as distinguished by Van der Kleij et al. (2019).

| Model | Description | Key features |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| transmission model | no student role | Students are passive and react to feedback in a predictable way. |
| information processing | limited student role | Students process feedback information in different ways based on their individual characteristics. |
| communication | some student role | Students choose how to make sense of feedback in interactions with others and self-generated insights. |
| dialogic | substantial student role | Students actively assess, seek, provide, receive and use feedback through self-regulated learning. Feedback effects are unpredictable and depend on various social, contextual and individual variables. |

The most extreme way to reimagine classroom assessment and feedback is reflected in the dialogic model. In this model, teachers and students come to shared understandings of feedback by clarifying expectations, making one's own understanding explicit, and negotiating ways forward (Carless, 2013). What is key here is that teachers do not assume students understand feedback and know how to act on it, but follow-up to check on student receipt and understanding of feedback. In case of written feedback, this means that feedback is not seen as an endpoint, but rather, is used as an entry point for further discussion. In a classroom situation, dialogic feedback involves discussions with one or multiple students to gradually build shared understandings through multiple feedback loops. Importantly, the teacher and students all take on the roles of assessors and feedback seeker and provider (Van der Kleij, 2021; Van der Kleij & Adie, 2020; Van der Kleij et al., 2019).

The next sections in this paper focus on the key features of a student-centred perspective on classroom assessment and feedback. Research has demonstrated that if implemented with fidelity, these feedback strategies can substantially lift student achievement outcomes (Brooks et al., 2021a).

Clarifying what success looks like

A critical first step for the design of assessment is identification of learning outcomes or standards and what different levels of quality look like (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 2009). This step aligns the assessment and feedback process, as it sets the foundations by answering the question 'where am I going?' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Thus, if students are to take an active role in assessment and feedback, they need to understand what quality looks like. This can effectively be achieved through co-constructing criteria (Brooks et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Assessing progress

There are various formal and informal assessment methods that may be used to determine what progress students are making in relation to the learning goals. This step pinpoints how students are progressing, and aligns with the question 'how am I going?' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Teachers play a critical role in monitoring the progress of all students, but often run into issues of feasibility given large class sizes. Empowering students to assess their own or their peer's learning as a means to complement teacher assessment is therefore vital in driving sustainable assessment and feedback practice (Brooks et al., 2021a, 2021b). This requires an understanding of what success looks like, as well as an understanding of how to identify next steps.

Determining the best way forward

The true power of assessment and feedback lies in its potential to direct future learning. Once it has been established what the goals are and how learners are tracking, it is necessary to answer the question 'where to next' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) to drive progress. Ensuring calibration of teacher or peer and self-assessment is vital here, as students are more likely to take action on feedback they have internalised and matches their self-assessment (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Brooks et al., 2021b). This is particularly relevant given the potentially powerful (negative) emotional impact of feedback on students (Lipnevich et al., 2016).

Research shows that students prefer feedback that is specific (Van der Kleij & Lipnevich, 2021). However, feedback that is too specific may be counterproductive. If feedback is too directive in nature, thus telling students what to do, their autonomy in the feedback process is undermined. It only requires students to process the feedback at a relatively superficial level and does not require them to self-regulate or actively think about the feedback (Hargreaves, 2012; William 2011). Of course, it can be helpful to suggest ways forward, but leaving room for students' decisions in how to act on feedback empowers them in their learning, and makes it more likely that the feedback will be useful beyond the immediate task. However, highly specific or scaffolded feedback may be needed if the student is a novice learner, or if the student becomes frustrated because they cannot envisage how to proceed (Shute, 2008).

How can I reimagine my classroom assessment and feedback practice?

If this article has inspired you to apply these evidence-based findings to your classroom assessment and feedback practices, the following questions may provide a useful starting point for reflection.

- What do I believe to be the purpose of feedback and how do I see the student role in feedback?
- How can I help students develop more sophisticated understandings of what quality looks like?
- Which conditions need to be in place for peer feedback to be beneficial to students?
- What resources could I leverage to enable greater student autonomy in the assessment and feedback process?
- To what extent are my students capable of planning next steps for learning? How can I support them in this process, while empowering them as independent learners?
- How do I know that feedback has been impactful?

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