



DESCRIPTIVE FEEDBACK Fosters Improved Student Learning

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In professional learning communities across Ontario, the conversation is increasingly turning to the importance of well-designed formative assessments. Providing students with clearly articulated criteria for assessment, with just-in-time descriptive feedback, not only fosters improved learning, but also informs instruction by helping to pinpoint learning concepts that students need to master.

Feedback – not evaluation – is the essential element in the formative assessment process. Educational researcher John Hattie has established that providing specific feedback to students in a timely fashion has the potential to improve student learning. After examining almost 8,000 studies, Hattie (1991) states that, “the most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback.” Researchers Black and Williams (1998) support Hattie’s findings. They synthesized results from 250 international studies on classroom assessment and concluded that maximizing student success involves three critical steps: involving students in the assessment process; increasing the amount of descriptive feedback; and decreasing the amount of evaluation.

One School’s Story

The staff at Blessed Margherita of Città di Castello in the Toronto Catholic District School Board is involving students in the assessment process. Teachers begin the process by asking, “What should our students be able to demonstrate?” Their classroom instruction is based on the goals they have identified by establishing clear criteria based on the curriculum expectations. Using the gradual release of responsibility framework, they give students multiple opportunities to develop an understanding of the criteria and standards being applied. Students are taught how to self-assess. At the beginning of their lessons, teachers clearly articulate the purpose for the assignment and with students co-construct or translate rubrics into kid-friendly language. Students are thus able to understand the constructive criticism they later receive. Teachers model how to apply feedback, using samples of student work. They show and discuss samples of good work in order to make the goal clear for the students. This process answers the question, “Where do I need to go?” Students see that their work and feedback relate directly to the established criteria.

Students are actively involved in both self and peer-assessments. They are taught that feedback should be positive in tone, identifying what has been done well and providing specific suggestions for improvement. Teachers facilitate class dialogue and the review of exemplars. They provide multiple opportunities for self-assessment and for facilitating peer review. Students compare self-assessments with peer and teacher feedback. Most important, students are given time to use the feedback to improve their work and to reflect on their learning.

The school team is beginning to witness the cognitive and motivational benefits of descriptive feedback. They are finding

that frequent, timely feedback provides students with information not only about their learning, but it can also motivate students to monitor their own progress, set goals and thus manage their own learning. This enhances student engagement, improves learning and leads to better quality work.

Principal’s role

The principal of Blessed Margherita, Maria Leitao, schedules joint planning time and creates time for teacher moderation. Teachers’ opinions are valued and meetings involve acceptance. As Maria says, “You have to be sincere. If staff members come to you with a concern, listen.” It is evident that this authentic and open approach promotes a collaborative school climate.

In addition to participating in the monthly divisional and staff learning meetings, Maria strives to engage in daily face-to-face interactions with teachers and students. She says,

I talk to the staff and students on my walks through the building and during my daily classroom visits. The students are very proud of the work displayed on the walls. I acknowledge their efforts and ask them to tell me about what they are learning. They are able to explain clearly what they were expected to do.

Maria shares her belief that as a leader her role in the assessment process is to “develop relationships and establish a culture of collaboration.” It is important to identify staff strengths and support them to take risks so that they will share their passion and ideas. This occurs through mentoring and coaching, divisional and staff meetings or in professional development sessions. It is essential to acknowledge staff efforts in order to nurture student success.

How do we, as learning leaders, support the practice of formative assessment?

As Student Achievement Officers (SAOs), we work with school and board staff to support student learning and achievement. The use of descriptive feedback is the current focus of many of our conversations in networked learning communities. Our conversations have highlighted the need for learning leaders to create routines, time and opportunities for teams to collaborate. Learning leaders provide access to curriculum resources as well as timely and accurate information about evidence-based assessment practices. They work side-by-side with teachers to reach every student by building a shared knowledge of evidence-based strategies and then ensuring that this definitely moves to action in the classroom. Therefore, it is not that the principal is expected to have all the answers but rather, it is about building capacity as the team learns and works together. This is how Blessed Margherita

has put into play the principles of student self-assessment and has reaped the benefits of descriptive feedback. It is also how *One School's Story* can become the story of many schools.

For tips on student self-assessment, review the special issue on this topic published by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2007 available at <http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/files/May30SelfAssessment.pdf>. While supplies last, you may order a free copy of this monograph from Service Ontario <https://www.publications.serviceontario.ca>.

Blessed Margherita of Città di Castello was selected as a School on the Move in 2007. Visit <http://www.curriculum.org/LNS/schoolsonthemove/> for further information. Contact Phyllis Greco, the lead teacher for this LNS initiative at Blessed Margherita at phyllis.greco@tcdsb.org.



Steps to Engage Students in Assessment

- Explain the instructional focus and purpose of the assignment.
- Establish clear criteria related to the instructional focus/ curriculum expectation(s).
- With students co-construct or translate rubrics into kid-friendly language.
- Show examples of quality work in advance so that the objective of the task is clear.
- Use anonymous student work samples to represent different levels of achievement.
- Collectively analyze the student work vis-à-vis the established criteria.
- Explicitly teach students that feedback stays in the descriptive mode.
- Identify criteria and evidence that align praise and point out suggestion(s) for improvement.
- Model personalized and positive feedback.
- Provide students with time and opportunities to use the feedback.
- Guide students in reflecting on how the feedback helps them to improve their work.

Feedback should be frequent and should be provided in a timely manner. Feedback provides the students with a clear picture of their progress towards their learning goals.

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