

# Using Feedback to Build Bridges to Learning

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*My undergraduate poetry professor, Professor Johnson, was a tall, thin woman, whose turtleneck was always the same colour as her trousers. Her hair was always piled up in a large, tight bun high on her head. She had a habit of clutching her pearls as she lectured. I thought of her as the praying mantis.*

*For our first major essay, we were to choose one of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century poems discussed in class, and present our interpretation. I chose Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"—the one that begins "Had we but world enough and time." I wrote that the speaker was clearly trying to bed the coy mistress, and furthermore, to father her children.*

*When Professor Johnson handed back our papers, I was devastated. C-*

*I couldn't believe it. I had worked really hard on this paper. I was sure of my interpretation—it made perfect sense. It was supported by the poem. How could I be wrong?*

*I approached Professor Johnson after class.*

*"Professor, I don't understand why my grade is so low."*

*"Maggie, your paper is well written, but I do not agree with your analysis."*

*For the next essay, my 'interpretation' of the text was essentially the one Professor Johnson had presented in her lecture. I didn't put anywhere near the same effort into this essay. I wrote what she spoke.*

*I got an A.*

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## Introduction: Why Doesn't My Feedback Work?

They are familiar refrains: students say they don't get any feedback. Teachers say they spend hours writing comments, only to watch students toss their papers in the trash as they leave the classroom. Students say they don't understand the teacher's comments. Teachers say students don't apply their feedback.

What these complaints suggest is that the biggest problem with teacher-student feedback may be one of miscommunication – or missed communication. Students don't recognize feedback when it is offered, know what to do with it when they do, or know how to ask for it if it's not provided. Meanwhile, teachers, perhaps especially in higher education, don't appreciate that their students need guidance on how to ask for, interpret, and apply feedback. We teachers tend to forget our own experiences and habits as students, while assuming that our student experience was universal and representative (Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009). In other words, we are our own implicit models (Grossman 1991): we expect our own students to think, write, study, and behave as we did ourselves.

This last point is, of course, very pertinent in Cégep education; chances are, most of us who have chosen to teach at the college level did so because school came pretty naturally for us. The things that fascinated us – philosophy, history, literature, science – naturally led us into teaching. And we're comfortable (perhaps *only* comfortable) in an academic environment. Is it fair, then, to assume that our students are comparably comfortable? That they know how to manage their workload, how to interpret our instructions, how to apply our feedback? One fundamental stage in our development as college teachers must be to recognize that our students, as well as their attitudes toward and approaches to our subject, are not mirror images of our own.

Thinking about this revelation in the context of assessment, consider that for feedback to be effective as a learning tool, both instructor and student need to understand what to do with it, why to do it, and how to do it consistently. Boud (2017) argues that feedback with no effect is not, in fact, feedback. Without interaction, models, and

explanations of feedback, students don't understand the fundamental concepts of instructor comments (Chanock, 2000). But many instructors don't provide such interaction because they feel that students "should know" how to interpret the comment (Chanock, 2000, p. 102). In other words, because most of us teachers knew what to do with feedback when we were students, we assume that we don't need to guide our students, to teach them how to read and respond to our feedback.

Several researchers have investigated problems regarding student reception to teacher feedback (Dohrer, 1991; Gibbs & Simpson, 2003; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Studies frequently indicate that feedback without interaction and guidance is ineffective, for the most part because students often do not understand instructor feedback (Bardine, Bardine & Deegan 2000; Chanock, 2000; Covic & Jones, 2008; Price & O'Donovan, 2006; Walker, 2008). This lack of clarity leads students to see feedback from their teachers with trepidation: at best, it is superficial and potentially confusing; at worst, it is corrective and demotivating.

*We need to reflect on what function our feedback fulfills, whether we make our meaning clear, and how we might use assessment and feedback more effectively, to foster learning and even motivate our students.*

Essentially, then, the problem lies in the gap between student needs and instructor expectations. Through my educational research, I explore how to bridge this gap, to find openings in our feedback interactions within which to create a dialogue, and perhaps to shift how students think about, receive, and interpret feedback. Within this feedback dialogue, I hope that students become comfortable in making their learning needs explicit, and I, as the teacher, learn to deconstruct my expectations and guide students in implementing feedback.

To this day, poetry remains my least favourite genre of literature to read and to teach. Perhaps it's unfair to lay that disdain entirely at Professor Johnson's door, but her comment on my paper certainly turned me off of her course, if not the whole genre. All of these years later, why does that one moment stick with me? How can I learn from (or how have I already learned from) it as a teacher?

If, as proposed, feedback is information about the gap between student performance and expectations, then Professor Johnson's explanation was *not* feedback; what it communicated was more about her expectation than my performance. I was judged against her interpretation of a piece of literature rather than a knowable standard of literary analysis. I felt like I wasn't asked to demonstrate that I could interpret and analyse poetry, but that I could predict what Professor Johnson's reading was likely to be. Even my interpretation of what her evaluation meant was guesswork, really—her feedback suggested

that my low mark was a result of not presenting a reading of the poem that corresponded to her own. It may be that my argument also wasn't well constructed, or that I was missing some crucial piece of information that belied my interpretation, or perhaps my analysis was too narrowly focused on the ending of the poem and failed to account for ideas presented in the opening lines. With no specific feedback, however, I had no choice but to guess what had gone wrong with my work, and naturally, I fell into the time-honoured student tradition of blaming the evaluator.

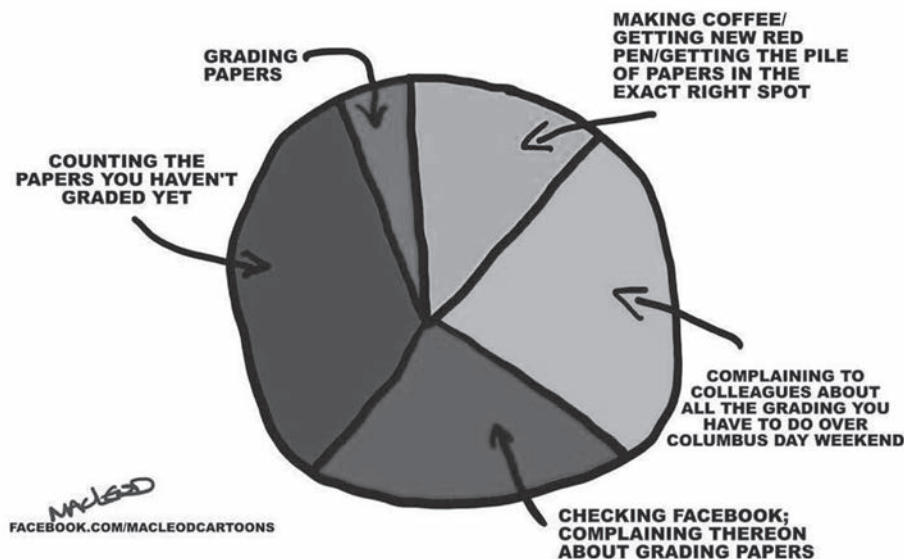
### **What Do You Mean, "What Do I Mean?"**

Think back to your own time as a student: in college, university, or even earlier. Do you remember a time when you got an assignment back and just couldn't figure out the teacher's comments? Or maybe there were no comments at all – just a grade that wasn't what you were expecting. Worse yet, did you ever receive a comment that made you feel like you hadn't tried hard enough or dug deep enough, or that you just weren't smart enough?

Perhaps you are one of the lucky few who had great teachers and were well suited to the world of traditional academia. But now you find yourself on the other side of the desk, striving to provide effective feedback to your own students, and you are at a loss. If they don't get it, isn't that on them? They should read more, read again, go find help, do more research, quit their part-time job, grow up, and take school more seriously. They should learn from your evaluations of their work. After all, what's more frustrating than spending the weekend grading student work, only to return that work and watch your students take one look at the mark and casually stuff their papers into their bags – or worse – the recycling bin?

Maybe, though, our frustration is matched by theirs. Maybe, as teachers, we need to reflect on what function our feedback fulfills, whether we make our meaning clear, and how we might use assessment and feedback more effectively, to foster learning and even motivate our students. Pedagogically, assessment is an integral and essential aspect of learning, "intrinsic to effective instruction" (Wiliam 2011). At its most basic, assessment is about *information*: teachers gather information about what their students are learning, students get information about their progress, institutions get information about success rates, and so on. The leap from mere information to effective feedback depends on what happens with the information generated. We assess students against standards – whether those standards are determined by some external body or our own idea of what constitutes excellent work – and our feedback is information about the gap between that standard and our students' actual performance (Ramaprasad, 1983). To be *effective*, that information offered through feedback has to be put to use. Unidirectional, closed statements of judgement—whether it's "good job" or "incomplete work"—will not provoke students to alter the gap.

## ANALYSIS OF FACULTY TIME USE WHILE "GRADING PAPERS"



### Formative, Summative, Blah Blah Blah

One question we might ask ourselves as teachers, then, is “what is the purpose of assessment?” or perhaps more accurately, “what are the purposes of assessment, and what do I want my students to get from this one instance of assessment?” If we are to engage in effective feedback, we need to embrace these reflections on the nature of assessment. *For how can we give feedback without a genuine, thorough understanding of what we expect students to do and why we’re asking them to do it?* Of course, sometimes our assessments are mandated and summative: a certification exam or cumulative project demonstrating that our students have mastered the required competencies. But these are final evaluations, and while feedback on these may be welcome, there is by definition no room for follow-up, at least within the relationship we have with that student. So teachers’ efforts toward developing effective feedback must be focused on instances of assessment that offer students opportunities to produce better work in the future. Class work, course assignments, and other formative assessments provide these opportunities.

A common misconception is that all formative assessment is ungraded, and all graded assessment is summative. In fact, any assessment, graded or otherwise, can be formative, in the sense that *formative* simply means that the assessment itself is a learning opportunity. Consider learning to drive: driving students do course work and homework; they drive with instructors and parents and other experienced drivers; perhaps they do practice theory tests online and book time on the driving school’s simulator. Along the way, they are getting constant feedback, from instructors and driving partners, from drivers in other cars, from the simulator screen, and so on – and from the car they’re driving, even. Without that multifaceted feedback, how much learning would happen? Some of the feedback,

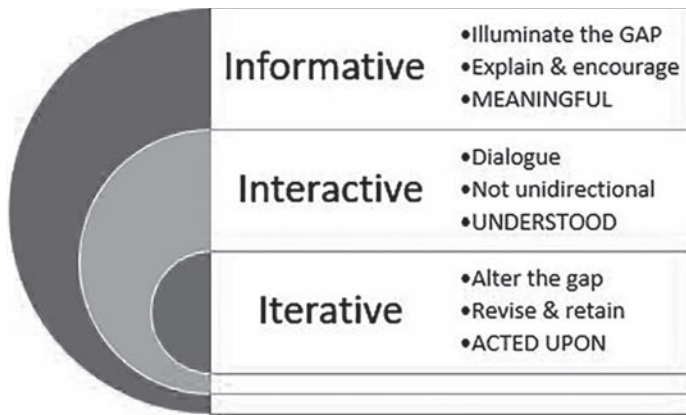
naturally, is geared toward the summative tests. We know they will have to pass a theory test, the nature of which is well-known; and we know they will have to successfully navigate a road test. But we also want them to become drivers with whom we’re willing to share the road, so our feedback might also touch on driving etiquette, or safety considerations, or basic mechanics, regardless of whether or not these elements will be evaluated summatively.

Wiliam (2011) suggested that formative assessment can also help teachers make decisions about future iterations of a course, a lesson, or an assignment; in other words, a teacher can use assessment for the benefit of future learners, based on present learners’ experiences. As implied above, effective feedback is not simply what comes after assessment; it is, particularly in formative assessment, “at the heart of effective learning” (Wiliam, p. 6). Wiliam, referring to the work of Allal and Lopez, said that the remediation model of assessment or *feedback + correction* has been particularly espoused in the Anglo-phone education model, whereas

within much of the research undertaken in Francophone countries, the central concept is ‘regulation,’ summarized as ‘feedback + adaptation. ... [here, regulation] used in the sense of adjustment in the way that a thermostat regulates the temperature of a room (p. 8).

In fact, simply correcting student work implies a closed process: student production, teacher correction, end of process. *Regulation*, on the other hand, implies student production, adjustment, reproduction, adjustment, and so on; in other words, assessment and feedback become cyclical and dialogic. Effective feedback is

meaningful, well understood, and acted upon; to indulge my love of alliteration, it is *informative, interactive, and iterative*. *Informative* feedback illuminates the gap between student performance and the standard. It explains how the performance measured up, and makes the grade associated with this evaluation meaningful. *Interactive* feedback is an exchange between teacher and student, or peer-to-peer, which provides further insight into the information. *Iterative* feedback allows for the information to be acted upon – perhaps in revision and reevaluation, or perhaps in student reflection and strategizing for future assessments.



Effective feedback is informative for both student and teacher. It relies on a mutual understanding of the standard and on our ability to explain to our students the nature of the gap between that standard and their performance. Why is this the standard? How is this standard relevant to their learning? How did their work compare to the standard? How big is the gap? Is this a gap that can be bridged easily, or do we need to take that bridge in steps? As teacher-assessors, we need to be explicit about our expectations and precise in our evaluation of our students' performance.

***Effective feedback is meaningful, well understood, and acted upon; to indulge my love of alliteration, it is informative, interactive, and iterative.***

So, offering feedback that is *informative* relates to the information we provide about the gap. *Interactive* relates to the communication and follow-up: for feedback to have an impact, we must enter into a dialogue with our students. This dialogue may be written or verbal, or some combination—we may write comments on student work, then invite questions or comments from them. How have they interpreted our comments? What do they think we're expecting in response? We can also invite feedback from students on their process, beyond the performance itself: how did they approach the assignment? Where did they struggle? What resources did they exploit? What resources did they want to use but couldn't find, or couldn't make fit?

According to Bérubé (2011), "one main goal of feedback is to signal the satisfaction or displeasure of the teacher" (slide 12). Best practice dictates that such affective feedback must be used temporarily and, more importantly, in conjunction with comments that "signal a gap between the product and the expectations" and with appropriate follow-up (slide 24). This follow-up is what makes our feedback iterative, for what is the purpose of information about a gap if we don't provide opportunities to bridge it? Our feedback must be acted upon, and we cannot take for granted that our students will know what actions to take, or why they should do it, without our guidance.

### Establishing Trust & Dialogue

How does all of this manifest in our practice? For me, these discussions provoke reflection on my approach to assessment and feedback. I may believe that the criteria, instructions, and written feedback I offer my students are very clear, but the recipients of these messages may not read them as I intended or apply them as I expect. Sadler (1998) identified factors that may delay or distort the effectiveness of feedback. The most influential factor, "temporal conditioning," refers to the notion that students become accustomed to accepting ineffective or even "defective" feedback; they also come to expect great discrepancies in the nature, amount, and depth of feedback that different teachers provide. Through temporal conditioning, Sadler claimed, students learn "survival habits" (p. 77) that must be overcome to establish a more effective learning culture. Furthermore, Pollock (2012) pointed out that teachers themselves tend to think of feedback as unidirectional and "based on a behaviourist" model (p. 3); that is, feedback is provoked by student performance, but generated only by the teacher. But if we in higher education are concerned with "the development of independent, autonomous, lifelong learners" (Ellery 2008, p. 427), then "we need to provide time for assessment-related learning practices" (p. 428), including dialogic feedback. Lizzio and Wilson (2008) determined that developmental feedback that provides strategies to help students bridge the gap between their performance and the expected results was perceived as most effective. This student perception validates Lizzio and Wilson's contention that effective feedback "should contribute to knowledge of performance and the nature of the performance gap between actual and ideal performance" (p. 264).

So if I want to create learning opportunities through formative assessment, I need to create space for training my students to interpret and apply feedback. More importantly, I need to take time to demonstrate to students that I am listening to their feedback, and I must recognize feedback as an ongoing dialogue or "system of feedback loops" (Wiggins 2005, p. 185). One way that I have done this with my own students is *dialogue journaling*. On a regular basis, students write to me in a paper journal, and I write back to them. I do not comment on the mechanics of their writing; there is no

grammar or spelling scrutiny. Instead, I write to them in response to what they have written, and I try to match their openness. I provide prompts, such as “tell me about your semester so far,” or “what’s your favourite place in the world?” If a student writes to me about feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to choose a university major, for instance, I might write back about my own experience and how I got through it. I don’t judge what they write; I share at the same level of intimacy. Gillespie (2005) argues that “mutual knowing” (p. 213) is an essential aspect of student-teacher connection; by sharing aspects of my own life, past and present, I demonstrate trust in my students, and I allow them to know me as well as I come to know them (Gillespie 2002).

Often, in my journal responses, I deliberately choose red ink. I want to provoke a shift in how feedback is perceived: our feedback is a dialogue through which we build and learn, no matter what colour we use. If your feedback isn’t informative, interactive, and iterative, it doesn’t matter that you chose a “friendly” ink colour.

Dialogue journals are, in my experience, an excellent way to build trust and set the tone for future instances of feedback, but I am aware that we don’t all have the time and space for such a consuming task on a regular basis. I encourage you to try it at least occasionally, especially at the beginning of the semester—it’s also an excellent tool for learning students’ names and tacitly conveying that you’re aware of their presence and absence.

There are other ways to engage with students that might work better than or in concert with journaling: exit cards, for instance, invite students to write one sentence in response to the day’s principal concepts, giving us immediate feedback on group-wide gaps in understanding that we can address in the next class, or signalling students who might be struggling silently. Another effective method I have used is conferencing: students meet with me one-on-one to discuss an assignment, whether during or after its completion. A little less time-consuming is one habit I have consciously developed: giving them five or ten minutes in class to read my comments after work is returned. They can consult with a classmate, and they are

required to talk to me, even for a few seconds, to ask about a comment or respond to a question I’ve written on their work. Finally, based on research I have conducted, I know that not all teachers use the same shorthand in their comments, so I include a legend of my preferred expression indicators, and for electronic submissions, I have a set of preset comments with links to online resources for recurring errors (see figure 1).

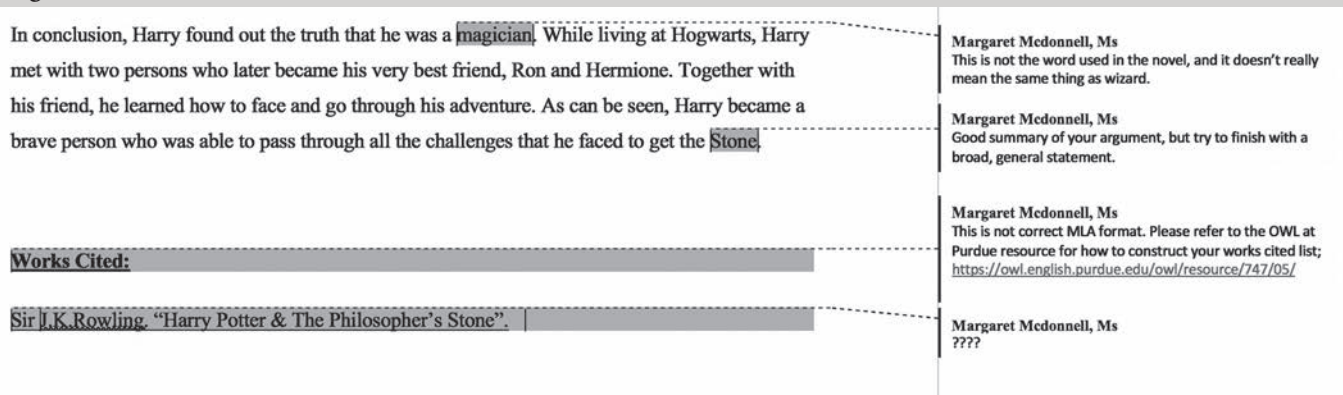
### Final Thoughts

We know—or at least, we hope—that our feedback affects our students. With effective feedback that is meaningful, interactive, and designed for follow-up, we can provoke positive change. We cannot assume that our students inherently understand what our feedback means, nor can we assume that they know what they’re supposed to do with that information. When it comes to assessment and learning, we need to be transparent about our expectations and clear about our intentions. Finally, we need to demonstrate our trust in our students, and we must be open to their feedback: if you want them to care about what you have to say, show them you care about what they have to say.



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**Figure 1**



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