Grant Wiggins on the Fine Art of Giving Feedback

(Originally titled "7 Keys to Effective Feedback")

"Decades of education research support the idea that by teaching less and providing more feedback, we can produce greater learning," says author/consultant Grant Wiggins in this trenchant *Educational Leadership* article. He proceeds to clarify a fuzzy term: "Basically, feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal."

In some situations, feedback is unspoken and immediately informative: hitting a tennis ball, telling a joke, seeing if students are attentive. But when people give us feedback, it often takes the form of value judgments or advice. Aren't judgments and advice helpful? Not if you want to cause learning, says Wiggins. Telling a student, *Good work!* or *This is a weak paper* provides no actionable information. Telling a student, *You need more examples in your report,* or a baseball player, *You might want to use a lighter bat* is, in most cases, annoying. "Unless it is preceded by descriptive feedback, the natural response of the performer is to wonder, 'Why are you suggesting this?'" says Wiggins.

Here are examples of effective feedback: *Good work: Your use of words was more precise in this paper than in the last one, and I saw the scenes clearly in my mind's eye.* or *Each time you swung and missed, you raised your head as you swung so you didn't really have your eye on the ball. On the one you hit hard, you kept your head down and saw the ball.* Here are Wiggins's criteria for effective feedback:

• *Goal-referenced* – "Information becomes feedback if, and only if, I am trying to cause something and the information tells me whether I am on track or need to change course," he says. A teacher might say, *The point of this writing task is to make readers laugh. So, when rereading your draft or getting feedback from peers, ask, How funny is this? Where might it be funnier?*

• *Tangible and transparent* – "Alas, far too much instructional feedback is opaque," says Wiggins. He tells about a student who was confused by his teacher's frequent jotted comment on his English papers – "Vag-oo." (What the teacher meant was *vague*!) Wiggins recommends that teachers videotape themselves teaching at least once a month to see how clearly they are coming across to students.

• *Actionable* – Students need to know specifically what to do. The following pieces of feedback are not concrete, specific, or useful: *Good job!   You did it wrong.   B+.*

• *User-friendly* – Feedback should not be overly technical or more than the recipient can handle. "Expert coaches uniformly avoid overloading performers with too much or too technical information," says Wiggins. "They tell the performers one important thing they noticed that, if changed, will likely yield immediate and noticeable improvement."

• *Timely* – Too often, students have to wait days, weeks, or even months (in the case of standardized tests) for important feedback on their work. Feedback can arrive more quickly if teachers use technology or peer reviewers.

• *Ongoing* – "What makes any assessment in education formative is not merely that it precedes summative assessments, but that the performer has opportunities, if results are less than optimal, to reshape the performance to better achieve the goal," says Wiggins. "This is how all highly successful computer games work."

• *Consistent* – "Teachers need to look at student work together, becoming more consistent over time and formalizing their judgments in highly descriptive rubrics supported by anchor products and performances," says Wiggins.

Wiggins closes with a sports analogy. His daughter aspires to run a 5:00 mile. As she runs a practice race, her coach yells out split times, gives feedback ("You're not swinging your arms!"), tells her where she stands ("You're on pace for 5:15"), and gives advice ("Pick it up – you need to take two seconds off this next lap to get in under 5:10!"). Wiggins contrasts this to many schools' pacing guides and use of interim assessments. "They yield a grade against recent objectives taught, not useful feedback against the *final* performance standards," he says. All this does is give the teacher a schedule for rolling out the curriculum. "It's as if at the end of the first lap of the mile race," says Wiggins, "my daughter's coach simply yelled out, "B+ on that lap!" To make school feedback more like highly effective sports feedback, he advises gearing interim assessments toward bi-annual goals and using item analysis to give students (and teachers) real *feedback* on what needs work.

"7 Keys to Effective Feedback" by Grant Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, September 2012 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 11-16), http://bit.ly/SLd3BU; Wiggins is at gwiggins@authenticeducation.org.

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