

# **Feed Back ... Feed Forward:** Using Assessment to Boost Literacy Learning

by Anne Davies

By agreement with the author, the following article may be copied and used as part of a Classroom Connections International Professional Development Learning Session. Permission is also granted to others who are working in a professional development setting to make up to 150 copies as long as credit is given. All other reprint rights belong to the author and this document cannot be copied or disseminated without prior written consent.

## **Classroom Connections International**

2449D Rosewall Crescent  
Courtenay, British Columbia  
Canada  
V9N 8R9

Tel: 1.800.603.9888  
Fax: 1.250.703.2921  
email: [editor@connect2learning.com](mailto:editor@connect2learning.com)

© 2000 Anne Davies / 2003 Classroom Connections International - [www.connect2learning.com](http://www.connect2learning.com)

The brain research tells us that our brains require feedback to learn (Pinker, 1997; Sylwester, 1995; Jensen, 1998). Classroom assessment research tells us that when we involve students in the assessment process, increase the amount of descriptive feedback students receive, and decrease the amount of evaluative feedback they receive, students learn significantly more (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Feedback for our brain is a bit like fats in our body. Some kinds of fats clog up our arteries and increase our cholesterol to dangerous levels while other kinds of fats lower our cholesterol. Evaluative feedback – performance standards with numbers to indicate ratings, 8/10, checks on a checklist, letter grades – are like the fats that clog our arteries but instead of shutting down the blood flow, they shut down the learning brain. Descriptive feedback – feedback that is specific about what is working and points out next steps in the learning – nourishes the learning brain.

We already do some things that work. We know that literacy structures such as Readers' Club, Writer's Club, guided reading, Writers' Workshop, and literature circles increase the amount of descriptive feedback students receive. When students read along with a tape at the listening centre, read to their big buddies, or read to their parents, the sources of feedback are increased. When students receive specific compliments about their learning, they learn more. But, because the brain functions the way it does, students need more feedback than most classroom teachers are able to provide. What can an already busy teacher do?

**Descriptive feedback** supports learning because it reduces the uncertainty. It tells students about their learning – what is working (do more of this) and what is not (do less of this). Descriptive feedback helps learners adjust what they're doing so they are more successful. Descriptive feedback can have many looks. Teachers give descriptive feedback when they highlight which criteria are met and which criteria need to be met. Students give themselves descriptive feedback when they compare their work to models, posted samples or detailed criteria. They receive descriptive feedback when they compare their work to models, posted samples or detailed criteria. They receive descriptive feedback when a classmate uses criteria to describe one specific thing they did that meets the criteria and one question they have.

Research<sup>1</sup> tells us that descriptive feedback that supports learning:

- comes during, as well as after, the learning
- is easily understandable and related directly to the learning
- is specific so performance can improve
- involves choice on the part of the learner as to what and how to receive feedback
- is part of an ongoing conversation about learning
- is in comparison to models, exemplars or descriptions
- is about the performance or the work, not the person

**Evaluative feedback** is different from descriptive feedback because it has usually been encoded and is reported in summary form using letters, numbers, checks, or other symbols. Students may understand whether or not they need to improve but unless descriptive feedback is provided, students do not get enough information to understand what they need to do in order to improve. Evaluative feedback tells learners how they have performed as compared to others. It often makes comparisons to other students and is sometimes attached to rewards and punishments such as grades or other consequences. Teachers seeking to improve student learning are advised by researchers (Kohn, 1993; Black and Wiliam, 1998) to reduce the amount of evaluative feedback and increase the amount of descriptive feedback (Davies, In press).

Some people are looking outside the classroom for help. In some districts, funds are being reallocated to provide for smaller class sizes and language and literacy intervention of one kind or another. These strategies help some students but what about the rest of our students? All learners need descriptive feedback. Classroom teachers are trying to build in more quality descriptive feedback but the problem is that as long as teachers see themselves as the sole source of feedback, students will not receive as much descriptive feedback as they need to learn.

When students know where they are going, they are more likely to get there because they can give themselves feedback as they learn. Think about a golf course. Golfers don't have to guess where the hole is – there is a flag in it. So even if you end up in the trees or in the sand trap, you still know where you are going. You can give yourself feedback about where you are in relation to where you want to be. There are strategies that increase the descriptive feedback students receive that are simple enough to be practical in our busy classroom and do not require teachers to be one-on-one with learners. Teachers are increasing the amount of descriptive feedback students receive by involving them in setting and using criteria<sup>2</sup>, giving specific compliments, self-assessing, and collecting evidence or proof. This isn't a complicated process as the following example illustrates<sup>3</sup>.

As students read their practices passages out loud during the reading club time, the teacher guided the other students to listen and to compliment the reader. The compliments reflected the reader's performance and the students' understanding of what good oral reading sounds like and looks like. They would say things like, "You used really good expression. I liked the way your voice went low when you read the giant's part," or, "I like the way we could hear you." If the compliment lacked specificity such as "It was good" or "You did a good job," the teacher would follow-up by pointing to the list of criteria they have made and ask, "What made it good?" It became a class expectation that compliments would be specific so the person receiving them would know what exactly they had done well.

### Reading Aloud

Mrs. M., a primary teacher wanted to help students become better able to read aloud. She began by asking her students, "What do good readers do when they read aloud?" As they talked together, they created the following list:

You can hear their voice  
They show the pictures  
Their voice goes up and down  
If the book has a question, their voice has a question in it  
They read with expression  
They make connections to what they know  
They hold the book so you can see their face  
They practice first  
They ask for help

After they were able to give descriptive feedback in the form of specific compliments, the teacher asked if there was anything else the children noticed about what good readers do when they read out loud. The children contributed more ideas and the teacher added them to the list. One child said that his dad said to take a break and breathe in when you get to a period. The teacher, using an idea developed by Colleen Politano, decided to increase the sources of descriptive feedback by creating a feedback form using the students' ideas about what makes a good oral reader.

The teacher introduced the children to the recording sheet and explained that the person listening was to check off everything they saw their partner doing and then trade places. The teacher modeled the process. When students were ready for independent practice, they worked with a partner and used the sheet to record how well each partner was reading. Sitting knees to knees with their books, one partner read aloud while the other kept track of what they did that showed they were able to read aloud by checking off when they saw the evidence. The partner doing the reading practiced his skills so he could make sure everything got checked. The partner doing the recording got to see what oral reading could look like. Everyone learned more. This simple peer assessment became another way students could give each other feedback. As they learned more about reading aloud they kept adding ideas to the list.

When teachers involve students in setting criteria for different kinds of learning, they may ask, "What is important about group time?" "What does a good line up look like?" "What is important about a story?" "What do you want me to notice about your art project?" or, "What is important about clean-up time?" We help students understand what the learning looks like and sounds like.

When we ask students to self-assess or give feedback to others without involving them in setting criteria with us, they may not have the language or knowledge.

Some of our students know what they are to learn and they learn it. Others, the ones who typically struggle the most in our classrooms, don't know what they are to learn unless we find a way to 'plant the flag.' When we involve students in setting criteria, giving compliments and finding proof, we increase the descriptive feedback available to learners without having to be everywhere at once. When we increase the sources of descriptive feedback available to our students, we increase the literacy learning.

### Reading Aloud

Reader's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Supporter's name: \_\_\_\_\_

As you listen to your partner read notice the things he or she does that show she or he is a good reader.

- You can hear their voice
- They show the pictures
- Their voice goes up and down
- If the book has a question, their voice has a question in it
- They read with expression
- They hold the book so you can see their face
- They practice first
- Sometimes they take a breath when there's a period

<sup>1</sup> See Davies (In Press) chapter 2 for research references.

<sup>2</sup> *Setting and Using Criteria* (1997) by Gregory, K., Cameron, C. and Davies, A. shows different ways to give students descriptive feedback.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Colleen Politano for this example. You can find more brain-friendly ways to increase the feedback students receive in her latest book written with Joy Paquin called *Brain-Based Learning With Class* (2000) published by Portage and Main Press/Peguis Publishers (Available through Connections Publishing [www.connectionsublishing.ca](http://www.connectionsublishing.ca)).

## Reference List

1. Davies, A. (2000). *Making Classroom Assessment Work*. Courtenay, BC: Connections Publishing. [www.connectionspublishing.ca](http://www.connectionspublishing.ca).
2. Gregory, K., C. Cameron & A. Davies (1997). *Setting and Using Criteria*. Courtenay, B.C.: Connections Publishing.
3. Jensen, E. (1998). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
4. Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble With Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, And Other Bribes*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
5. Pinker, S. (1997). *How the Mind Works*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.
6. Politano, C. & J. Paquin (2000). *Brain-Based Learning With Class*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage and Main Press/Peguis Publishers.
7. Sylwester, R. (1995). *A Celebration of Neurons: An Educator's Guide to the Brain*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

© 2003 Anne Davies

Originally published in *Primary Leadership*. Vol.2 No. 3 Spring Issue (2000) p.53-55.

Dr Anne Davies is an independent consultant and author of numerous books who is invited to speak and consult across North America on issues related to assessment. She lives in Courtenay, BC. She can be contacted by email at [anne@connect2learning.com](mailto:anne@connect2learning.com).