# GUIDING STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

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How do you give feedback that challenges students to do and be their best while also boosting, not undermining, their self-confidence and motivation? Experienced teachers have lots of strategies that they use. But underneath all the techniques lies a critical factor: The relational ways teachers interact with students.

Several years ago, a team of researchers led by David Scott Yeager conducted an experiment in a middle school that highlighted the importance of trust. First, the social studies teachers assigned students to write an essay about a personal hero. When they turned it in, the teachers gave their regular, high-quality feedback.

Then the researchers randomly placed one of two notes (written by the teacher) on each essay. One gave an encouraging message: "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know that you can reach them." The other had a neutral message: "I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your paper."

The essays were then given back to students, and they were given the option of revising their essay based on the feedback. Students who received the "high expectations" note were significantly more likely to revise their essays than those who received the neutral note. (And remember, the notes were randomly assigned.)

Students develop relationships in schools with both adults (teachers, staff, administrators) and peers. Teacher-student relationships can be a particularly powerful catalyst for motivation and learning. Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework provides a tool for exploring positive teacher-student relationships. This month's content focuses on how teachers use feedback and other strategies to challenge students to work toward their goals.

This experiment underscored the importance of high trust and expectations in teacher-student relationships as foundational to how students receive feedback. That's the focus of this month's research highlights and tools.

SOURCE:
Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J.,...& Cohen, G. L. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(2), 804-824.

## INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

Giving effective feedback that pushes students to learn and grow has been the subject of research for many years. Recently, for example, scholars such as Carol Dweck have helpfully emphasized effective strategies for praising students by emphasizing effort more than performance.

Perhaps more challenging is to know what to do when students' work or behavior is below expectations. Some educators, parents and others have resorted to praising mediocre work in an effort to boost self-esteem. Yet that approach often backfires; students see through it, and it even reinforces their preconceptions that they cannot excel.

These research insights offer starting points for challenging students to reach toward their aspirations through feedback that grows out of strong teacher-student relationships.

SOURCE:
Hesse, F., Care, E., Buder, J., Sassenberg, K., & Griffin, P. (2015). A framework for teachable collaborative problem-solving skills. In P. Griffin & E. Care (Eds.), *Assessment and teaching of 21st century skills* (pp. 37-56). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

## When Teachers Give Feedback, Are Students Listening?

Giving feedback is clearly important for learning and achieving goals. But students have to use the feedback in order for it to help them learn and grow. Researchers have identified three key factors that make it more likely that students will internalize feedback:

1. Students view the source of feedback as **trustworthy and credible**. Teachers with experience in the content matter, for instance, might be viewed as a more credible source of feedback on a research paper than peers. However, if they are unfair or inconsistent in their feedback, that would undermine their trustworthiness.
2. Students believe they have **a voice and power**. If a teacher holds most of the power in relationships with students, the process of receiving feedback becomes a passive act, and students don't fully engage.
3. Students are more likely to use feedback if teachers convey **positivity and acceptance**. Students need to know that the feedback is offered because the teacher believes in them and cares about them. Neutral or negative dynamics undermine any desire to pay attention to the feedback.

SOURCE:
Winstone, N. E., Nash, R. A., Parker, M., & Rowntree, J. (2016). Supporting learners' agentic engagement with feedback: A systematic review and a taxonomy of recipience processes. *Educational Psychologist,* 1–21. http://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2016.1207538

## Matching Feedback to Students' Progress

Feedback works best when it is clear and fits with students' own progress. It must be clear on the goals of the task, what progress has been made so far, and what students need to do to next. For example, just asking students to "do more" or "do better" does little to guide students to identify the next steps they need to take to learn and improve.

Teachers can strengthen the effectiveness of their feedback in a variety of ways:

- Use assessments as feedback for your teaching practice. Do students' answers show that the concept needs to be re-taught? (Too often, assessments are designed as a snapshot in time and do not provide effective feedback for improvement.)

- Create a classroom environment that encourages students to share their mistakes and seek feedback.

- Match feedback to the ways students receive it best. For example, do your students receive feedback better when it is publicly or privately given?

- Provide feedback that shows what students can do to improve.

SOURCE:

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research,* 77(1), 81–112.

## Trust: The Foundation of Effective Feedback

The level of trust between students and teachers plays a critical role in student motivation and learning. If students trust the person offering critical feedback, they're more likely to view the feedback as motivated by a desire to help them improve. If they don't trust the source, they will view it very differently and dismiss it as biased.

This dynamic is more complicated when students are already mistrustful based on past experience. If they are subject to stereotypes based on their race, gender or other personal quality, they may mistrust the intent of the person giving feedback based on past experiences and norms in the school or community.

For example, African American students may wonder, researchers suggest, if a teacher's feedback is "genuine desire to help or a bias against their racial or ethnic group." If past experience suggests that criticism is unfair or based on bias, students may infer negative motives behind ambiguous feedback.

Similarly, students who have experienced hostile feedback in the past will likely have their guard up about the motives behind what they see as hostile criticism. As researchers conclude, "Mistrust can lead people to view critical feedback as a sign of the evaluator's indifference, antipathy or bias, leading them to dismiss rather than accept it."

Overcoming these challenges requires the following when offering critical feedback:

1. Emphasize that the feedback is based on the teacher's high standards.
2. Demonstrate that the teacher believes the student can reach those standards.
3. Provide substantive feedback that guides the student toward reaching the standard or expectation.
4. Emphasize the effort that drove the improvement when providing later feedback.

When students have these positive experiences of improving after receiving critical feedback, they can begin changing how they will interpret future feedback, based on the trust that is formed through these intentional practices.

SOURCE:
Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J.,...& Cohen, G. L. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General,* 143(2), 804-824.

## Learning from Athletes

The way athletes learn from their mistakes and improve has implications for the classroom as well. When athletes work to improve their abilities, they encounter setbacks and failures. Coaches encourage athletes to learn from these mistakes while they practice. If an athlete misses the mark, they understand it is a natural step in improvement.

Both negative and positive experiences provide opportunities for growth in students, too. Students need encouragement that failures are not meant to be the end of the learning process. Instead, they are important lessons on changing course for improvement. Students should reflect on mistakes and successes like athletes, understanding that both outcomes give feedback on what can be practiced next.

SOURCE:
Crust, L., & Clough, P. J. (2011). Developing mental toughness: From research to practice. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action,* 2(1), 21–32.

# Four Strategies to Guide Student Learning

Guiding students in their own learning involves shifting responsibility for learning to the student while also providing the scaffolding needed to notice mistakes and probe for learning. After observing how effective teachers guided students' learning, researchers identified a sequence of four "fairly systematic, yet not scripted" strategies:

## 1. Ask Questions to Check for Understanding

- Use who, what, when, where, why and how questions to tap previously taught concepts or skills to address misconceptions.
- Probe with follow-up and clarifying questions which help students elaborate on their answers.
- Challenge students to bring together information from different places (such as past and present) to create new understanding.
- Ask students to formulate a problem-solving technique or rule of thumb based on what they know.
- Invite students to use what they've learned to speculate or create a new insight.

## 2. Prompt When Students Are Confused

- Prompt for background knowledge that students may not think about immediately.
- Prompt for process or procedural knowledge, such as reminding students of a checklist.
- Prompt for models, templates or frames, such as sharing a sample text to understand an author's writing style.
- Reflective prompts that get students thinking about their own thinking processes. For example: What am I trying to accomplish? What strategies am I using? How well am I using the strategies? What else could I do?

## 3. Cue Students When They Miss Something

- Draw students' attention to visual cues (such as illustrations, photographs, bold-faced words, diagrams or blinking icons) that prompt them to rethink their answers.
- Offer verbal cues, such as: "Watch out! This is a tricky word. Pay attention to all the parts."
- Making gestures that focus students' attention (such as pointing to a map).
- Give physical cues, such as touching a student's shoulder to shift the student's gaze.
- Create environmental cues, such as displays that remind students of key information.

## 4. Model and Give Direct Explanations

Sometimes the other strategies don't lead to student understanding. In those cases, teachers shift to sharing their knowledge in these ways to ensure understanding:

- Model how the task could be completed or the strategy could be applied.
- Use "think-alouds" to reveal how the teacher thinks about the topic.

SOURCE:
Adapted from Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2010). Identifying instructional moves during guided learning. *The Reading Teacher,* 64(2), 84-95.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING

An underlying goal of education is to help students learn how to be learners. Teachers support and guide students not only to internalize course content, but also to develop learning strategies they can use to achieve their goals on their own throughout life.

It can be helpful to give students opportunities to think about how they learn, encouraging them to take on more responsibility for learning on their own over time. This activity introduces students to three broad types of teaching and learning on a continuum from teacher-centered  ("you do") to group work ("we do") to independent work ("I do").

This activity can work well in any subject area, particularly when you're introducing a new style of learning, such as group work or independent study.

### Step 1

Before the activity, gather enough paper for each student to make several paper airplanes. Also practice folding a paper airplane.

**NOTE:** If you want to be creative and more challenging, try an unusual paper airplane, such as those shown on www.foldnfly.com. If you have a student who is particularly skilled with making paper airplanes, consider inviting her or him to show the class how to make an unusual one.

## Step 2

Introduce the activity by saying that we all learn different things in different ways. To start thinking about the many ways they learn, have students remember something they've learned in the past few months. It could be something in your class, in another class, outside of school, on a team or on their own. It could be something fun or something serious. Ask them to share what they have learned briefly with a neighbor.

## Step 3

Then have students think about how they learned what they learned, and then share that with their neighbor. If they don't easily come up with examples, mention some, such as doing group projects, listening to presentations or watching a YouTube video, practicing on a team, or solving problems on their own. Have students call out ways they learned, and list their ideas on the white board or interactive white board.

## Step 4

Introduce three different approaches to learning:

- **"You do"**
  Someone else tells or shows you in how to accomplish a task.
- **"We do"**
  Groups learn the task together and from each other.
- **"I do"**
  Students each do the task on their own without help from others.

## Step 5

Say that we keep learning in all three ways throughout our lives. But a goal of education is to shift to where students can learn most things on their own.

## Step 6

Ask students to recall the different ways they have learned something new (step #3 above). Quickly decide together which ways of learning fit best with these three approaches: I do, we do and you do. Highlight examples that show how students progressed from being taught a skill ("You do") to doing something independently ("I do").

## Step 7

Tell students they will practice the "You do, we do, I do" process by making a paper airplane. Provide at least three pieces of paper to each student.

## Step 8

Start with the **"You do"** approach: Demonstrate for students how to make a paper airplane by folding a piece of paper. (If students already know how to make a paper airplane, add a challenging step, such as bending the wings a certain way or adding a paper clip to the plane.)

## Step 9

Have students try to fold the same paper airplane by themselves (without helping each other). Provide 1–2 minutes to do so. Note that some students will successfully complete the airplane, while others may not, which is fine. Have them show the results of their work.

## Step 10

Briefly discuss what makes "You do" learning effective. When is it most helpful? For example, it helps when students actively listen, take notes and keep focused on the teacher or expert. It also helps when the teacher knows what he or she is doing.

## Step 11

Next, tell students that they will move to the **“we do”** step in which they will work together.

## Step 12

Split students into groups of 2–3 and give five minutes for students each to fold a new paper airplane as demonstrated, with the opportunity to ask those around them for help. Walk around the room and assist groups as needed.

## Step 13

After time is up, have students show what they’ve done and talk about what made this kind of learning work best. Examples might be people respecting each other, everyone participating and everyone helping each other learn.

## Step 14

Finally, move to the **“I do”** step. Provide 1–2 minutes for students to fold a new paper airplane by themselves. Remind students that, in this step, they will need to work independently.

## Step 15

On one wing of this new plane, ask students to write a way they will help each other learn in the coming weeks. As examples, remind them of the class’s group work expectations or what they shared on how they have learned things in the past.

## Step 16

After the last step is completed, let students throw their paper airplane to someone else. If many students know each other, ask them to throw the airplane to someone they do not know very well yet. When students catch their airplane, ask them to share what was written.

## Step 17

Debrief on the activity by asking students how it felt when they were expected to do a task by themselves right after the teacher's demonstration. How was this different than when they were able to ask group members or the teacher for help? Did their planes improve?

## Step 18

Have them think about other areas of school and life where they are gradually taking on more responsibility for their own learning. How might they apply some of the experiences from this activity to achieving other goals they have in life?