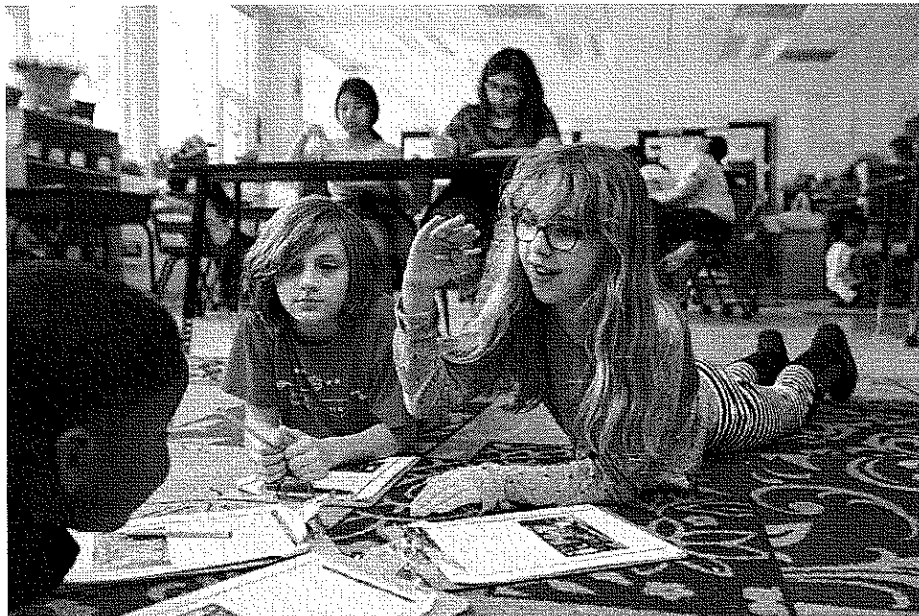# Developing Students' Ability to Give and Take Effective Feedback

By Katrina Schwartz   Oct 15, 2017



Fourth-graders work together to plan life for their "colony" during a class activity focused on colonial America. *(Courtesy of Allison Shelly/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action)*

When Emerie Lukas was hired to develop and teach a STEM Foundations course to middle school students at the Dayton Regional STEM School, she was starting from scratch. The stated goal of the course was to prepare students for more rigorous work in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) classes in high school, but Lukas knew that meant far more than academic preparation. She needed to teach her students how to give and take effective feedback, how to solve conflicts, how to organize themselves, and how to present, discuss and communicate their ideas. She knew without these qualities students wouldn't be prepared for a rigorous STEM environment.

To get at some of these non-academic skills, Lukas thought she might be able to use strategies from "Six Thinking Hats" by Edward de Bono. "His idea with 'Six Thinking Hats' is that you can train people to approach a problem in a methodical, organized way," Lukas said. De Bono used his strategy to coach employees at Fortune 500 companies, but Lukas thought she could adapt the strategies to her middle schoolers and in the process help them learn to give and take effective peer feedback.

**'So even though it was bumpy, and it wasn't always easy, the quality of work improved enough so it seemed like we needed to get better at doing this.'**
**—Elisabeth Simon, high school art teacher**

The hats and the colors that go along with them can seem a little confusing, but their purpose is to help students think concretely about the kind of feedback they are giving. "Yellow hat" feedback is positive. "Black hat" feedback helps point out specific parts of the work that aren't meeting the stated goal. This is not the time for suggestions on how to fix it, however, since there may be more than one solution. The "green hat" is when students can suggest ideas for fixing some of the issues raised during black hat feedback. These three hats are used most frequently, and some teachers Lukas has trained use only these ones.

The "red hat" is what Lukas calls "a breath of fresh air"; it's an opportunity for students to share subjective impressions that aren't necessarily related to the goal. Perhaps it's something they really like or a general impression they have about the work. The "blue hat" is to step back and look at the big picture. When kids are getting used to critique, the teacher often wears this hat to connect something in the critique to a bigger theme or put it in context. But when kids become skilled in critique they might also "put on the blue hat" for a moment to explain what skill they're trying to develop, the trajectory of their learning, and where they want peers to focus critique.

The white hat almost never comes up, and can be a bit hard to understand, but it's meant for objective observations. "Its purpose in my classroom was to point out things that you're not sure if the presenter intended to do them, but you're noticing and you have no judgment about," Lukas said. For example, if kids are designing websites and the homepage background is blue, but another page is green, a white hat comment might point that out so the presenter is aware, but it isn't something that necessarily needs to be changed to improve the work.

Training kids to give effective critique is one of those teaching strategies that takes some time on the front end, but can save a lot of time once students get good at it. It's common for students to give unhelpful, general or unkind feedback that doesn't do much to advance a peer's goals for the work, but Lukas found when she carefully trained students on some conversational "commandments" and attitudes around peer critique, 12-year-olds could give feedback as well as any adult. Even better, when kids got feedback from peers, she found they internalized it more.

Quality Critique

But incorporating peer critique into the classroom does take time, which is most effectively spent on bigger, meatier projects that students are invested in improving. Lukas advises teachers she works with to use the adapted Six Hat feedback strategy only on assignments that require students to do several drafts, so they have time to incorporate the feedback they received.

"You can't just front-load all of it," Lukas cautioned. She knows it can seem complex at first, but she tells teachers not to teach the six hats as a rigid structure that students have to remember, but rather to introduce new elements as they naturally arise in class. "I don't think [students] absorb it or see the value of it until they value critique," Lukas said. "As they buy in more and more to the process, they care more and more about doing it well."

The success of peer critique depends on a lot on some basic ground rules to ensure both the presenter and the person giving feedback are on the same page and getting something out of the experience.

**GROUND RULES**

1. **Pick work that matters.** Getting peer feedback on worksheets that students aren't invested in improving is probably not a good use of time. But when teachers buy into using peer feedback as a way to improve the craftsmanship and depth of more complicated projects, they may be surprised at how insightful students can be.

2. **Be kind.** Lukas emphasizes that both words and body language matter here, and sometimes the teacher has to help kids fake it until they make it. When students aren't used to the process, she presents it to them as though she's offering them a code to effective adult communication. At first, following the rules starts out as a performance, but over time kids internalize it and it becomes part of them. She teaches students to nod as a peer presents, to validate what a peer said with specifics before disagreeing, to make eye contact. The word "should," is forbidden. Instead phrases like "Did you consider?" "Maybe try" and "What if" can go a long way to promoting kindness, and help prevent the person receiving feedback from getting defensive.

3. **Be helpful.** This ground rule requires that the teacher, or students themselves when they are more adept at the process, choose a discrete goal for feedback. Lukas often chooses a skill that "not one everyone has mastered, but also not one that everyone sucks at." When she trains teachers on the Six Hat strategy she notices that often teachers pick too many goals, focusing on all the elements of their rubric, instead of honing in on the skill they really want students to improve with the specific project being critiqued. Setting a concrete goal helps keep the conversation productive and leads toward next steps for the presenter.

4. **Be specific.** When kids don't know how to give good feedback they may say something like, "Good Job," which doesn't help improve the work. The "copy and paste" test is one way to help students understand what it means to be specific. If the feedback could be copied and pasted onto someone else's project, it's not specific enough. Good feedback points to concrete evidence in the piece of work.

5. **Keep it moving.** The goal is to give objective feedback that doesn't make the presenter feel defensive. Curbing redundant comments is one big way to keep the process moving. Providing a way for students to validate a former comment on paper or with some sign or quick sound are good ways to do this. "There should be a way in a well-designed activity to validate and reinforce things that are redundant," Lukas said. It's helpful for the presenter to know if many people agree on a point, but it can be done quickly.

6. **Hold everyone accountable.** This ground rule is meant to ensure that feedback-givers are being kind, helpful and specific, as well as to help the presenter think about how to use the feedback. It could be a reflection on the three pieces of feedback a student plans to incorporate in the next draft, or a conversation with the teacher about next steps. Or it could be a shareout to the class, thanking them for the feedback, reiterating what they heard and committing to actionable next steps. This helps all the kids see that the exercise wasn't a waste of time. It's also important to have accountability for those critiquing. Lukas explains critique to the kids as sacred process, something that requires maturity. She tells them that if they aren't talking they should be writing their feedback, since there's only a limited number of time for oral feedback. "Everything subliminally or not is about reinforcing the cultural value of what we are doing," Lukas said.

And, while calling kids out in front of other kids is a controversial teaching move, in this process Lukas believes it's important to openly address when a student is being snide or mean. She'll just say something like, "I'm not convinced that's the level of kindness you would expect in your critique." She says since one of the goals of this process is interpersonal skill development, the only way to deal with mean feedback is to talk about it openly and in the context of validating the process.

**PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE**

All these rules and hats can seem a little overwhelming, but teachers who've made peer feedback a centerpiece of their classrooms say they take what they want and leave the rest. Lukas helped all the teachers at Dayton Regional STEM School integrate the practice into their content areas and has since moved on to consult with other districts too. The approach is being used in elementary, middle and high schools with good effect.

"When we first started it was really bumpy," said Elisabeth Simon, a visual arts teacher at Yellow Springs High School. Simon began using the Six Hats for peer feedback when her school moved to project-based learning and there was a greater emphasis on deep projects that necessitated craftsmanship, revision, and thus critique. But kids weren't used to the process and thought the formal structure was silly. Students often took feedback personally and didn't incorporate it into their work. It felt like a waste of time to Simon. "It's easy to give up as a teacher," she said.

But as she was incorporating peer critique into her classroom, Simon was also experiencing the process herself in staff meetings. Every other week the faculty at her school engage in a "tuning" process, where a few teachers present a project they

plan to use in class and get feedback from the group. "Experiencing it is powerful and it helped us believe that if we stick with it, and believe in it, we find it powerful and our students will as well," Simon said.

She eases new students into the process by starting with a fairly low-stakes assignment. She might do a gallery walk, and have students post "warm and cool" (yellow and black hat) feedback on Post-Its next to the work. "Their heart and soul wasn't in it in the first place, so it doesn't feel as scary," Simon said. Then she gradually adds complexity, until students are expert givers of feedback.

"Usually what I have to do is help the people giving the feedback to frame the feedback well so that it's objective, it's helpful, so it's around the student's goals," Simon said. She grades the feedback itself at first, until students know how to do it well. She says it also helps that the whole district is incorporating project-based learning, so incoming freshmen are already better at giving and receiving feedback than previous classes she's had.

"We saw their work improve, too," she said. "So even though it was bumpy, and it wasn't always easy, the quality of work improved enough so it seemed like we needed to get better at doing this and they need to get more effective at it."

**Holly's Breadth Portfolio**
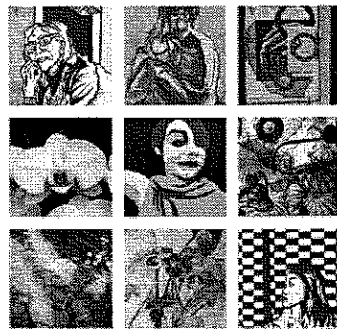
**Holly's Concentration Portfolio**
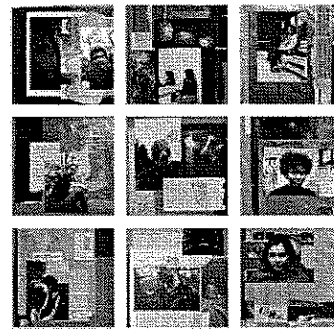


AP Studio Art portfolios exhibited on Simon's class website.

It might seem obvious that critique should be part of art class, but before Simon adopted this strategy she didn't ask students to give feedback on each other's work because "I didn't have a good set of tools to depersonalize it. I didn't have a good set of tools to give feedback that was meaningful. So the feedback was very superficial." Instead, she'd often ask students to assess their own work. Meanwhile, her assessment focused on the quality of the final product. Now she's much more focused on the process: "Are they growing? Is the work improving? Are they making the changes that they recognized they need to make after a critique?"

The focus on growth has had the added benefit of infusing more equality into her classroom. Now, a very skilled artist can receive helpful feedback on a personal goal from a less technically proficient student, and grow from that process. Similarly, the less skilled student can grow in his goals, which may be different.

"In my experience, it's invaluable. It's the best thing to improve their work," Simon said of the critique process. She remembers vividly when her AP studio art students set themselves the goal of producing a professional quality book of art. They had been through several rounds of peer critique and felt they were close to done when they had a critique from an outside expert that was harsh. The expert said if students wanted the work to be at a professional level it wasn't enough to tinker around the edges -- they needed to start over.

kind, helpful and specific, hitting home the message by praising the feedback students give, not the work they do.

During a halfway point critique students compare their mock-ups to photo references. *(Courtesy Elisabeth Simon)*

She teaches students who are receiving feedback to say "OK, thanks," to all feedback, even if they don't like something someone said or are feeling defensive. Ultimately, the way the work will change is up to its creator, and the feedback is only meant to help each person get to their best work. With that framework as a guiding star, Beers has found her students work harder and with more intention when they know their peers will be giving them feedback.

Beers says in the short time she's been intentionally using peer feedback her biggest challenges have been helping students to take the feedback well -- some are better at this than others -- and getting them to implement what they heard. She's tried modeling the implementation of feedback with the whole class before setting them off to try on their own, but she thinks she can get to even better quality work with a few tweaks.

"Part of the problem I had last year was I didn't say, 'Hey, someone is going to look at your work again so you need to make sure you're applying it,' " Beers said. She thinks if she plans for an extra revision and work cycle she'll see better results.

Asking students to critique each other's work can be an effective way to build their metacognition about the qualities of good work and whether or not those qualities are on display. All these teachers reflected that the act of giving feedback to a peer helps students to think about their own work more critically. And teachers can see how well students understand the criteria based on the type of feedback they give. But students don't necessarily come to school equipped with the skills to engage in this process in a mature and helpful way -- they have to be trained.

SEE COMMENTS

MindShift is a free editorially independent source of education news and information. We serve teachers and parents around the world – and we depend on your support!

If you value MindShift, please donate today.