

Using Student Feedback to Improve Teaching Practice – A Teaching Idea

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Abstract *While teachers regularly give feedback to their students, they rarely ask for feedback from their students. In considering digital student feedback as a pupil voice strategy, this teaching idea endeavors to encourage teachers to listen to their students in order to improve their teaching. Starting with a discussion of the theory regarding pupil voice and digital student feedback, the theory is then put into practice as the teaching idea is presented. The tool used in this teaching idea is Oncoo, a website that transforms students' questionnaire answers into a visual feedback target.*

Keywords *student feedback; visual feedback target; pupil voice; teaching idea; classroom*

1. Introduction

Feedback is a key aspect of school education. While teachers regularly provide feedback to their students, e.g. when giving marks or correcting essays, a smaller number of teachers actively seeks feedback from their students. This imbalance of feedback giving and receiving seems to correlate with the distribution of power and knowledge between teachers and students. This trend has been observed by Wisniewski et al. (2020) who find in their meta-analysis of feedback studies that “[o]nly a very small percentage of the primary studies investigated feedback from students to teachers” (p. 12). However, teachers can greatly benefit from student feedback. In fact, Zierer and Wisniewski (2019) suggest that

“Student feedback has a demonstrably positive effect not only on student achievement but also on the satisfaction and health of teachers. There is no scientific confirmation whatsoever that it has any negative impact on pedagogical practice. However, it takes courage to start asking for student feedback.” (p. 35)

It is thus the aim of this theory-grounded teaching idea to relieve teachers of this fear of asking for feedback and to encourage them to listen to their students. This article will

start with a discussion of the relevant theory regarding pupil voice and digital student feedback before the theory is put into practice as the teaching idea is presented. The article concludes with a short reflection on the teaching idea.

2. Pupil Voice and Digital Student Feedback

As the wealth of scholarship on the subject illustrates, feedback can serve many purposes and has been defined in various ways. Therefore, it is necessary to be more specific about what kind of feedback will be dealt with in this contribution. Zierer and Wisniewski define feedback as “a data-based exchange of information between people” (2019, p. 12). Who exactly these people are remains open in this definition. In a school context, feedback can be given from teachers to learners, teachers to teachers, learners to learners and, finally, from learners to teachers. Moreover, the way in which feedback is given can be just as diverse: from analogue handwritten notes to digital feedback provided by apps or websites. As a meta-analysis of empirical research studies on feedback conducted by Wisniewski et al. (2020) reveals, feedback from teachers to students is most common whereas feedback from students to teachers is much less common (p. 11). Zierer and Wisniewski find that “feedback for teachers is usually limited to rare and spontaneous individual opinions and opinions of superiors in the context of official evaluation” (2019, p. 28). If feedback is systematically gathered at all, it tends to be collected as summative evaluation at the end of the school year or at the end of a school subject, as Anders (2021, p. 219) asserts. A reason for this lack of regular student feedback could be that teachers might be skeptical of their students' expertise.

The idea of the pupil voice argues against this impression and sees the students' perspective as a valuable insight and an opportunity to improve teaching. The basic premise of the concept is “that listening and responding to what pupils say about their experiences as learners can be a powerful tool in helping teachers to investigate and improve their own practice” (Flutter, 2007, p. 344). In order to help students learn, “teaching cannot and must not be a one-way street” (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 24). Flutter (2007) further argues that a “meaningful dialogue between teachers and pupils through the use of pupil voice strategies offers an important starting point in developing the art of teaching” (p. 344). By simply asking students what they think of a lesson, the teacher can easily elicit a spontaneous feedback response (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 44). However, to use student feedback efficiently, “it makes sense to have clearly defined criteria; ask the whole class; and conduct surveys anonymously” (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 44). When done efficiently, student feedback can “reveal blind spots by comparing perspectives” (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 29) but also “further enhance reflective capacities in teachers; inform teachers about the individual needs of their students; and, open up a dialogue of teaching and learning in the classroom” (Mandouit, 2018, p. 12). All in all, student feedback as a pupil voice strategy “can be [a] transformative experienc[e] for teachers” (Flutter, 2007, p. 351) but only if the initial feedback remains merely the first step of the process.

Working with student feedback is a process that is inextricably linked to reflection on different levels of complexity. In order to effectively use student feedback, a teacher

should attempt to answer all of Hattie and Timperley’s questions (Table 1). In any case, it should be stressed that feed-back “has no effect in a vacuum; to be powerful in its effect, there must be a learning context to which feedback is addressed” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82).

Table 1: Questions of Feed-up, Feed-back and Feed-forward (adapted from Hattie and Timperley and Zierer and Wisniewski)¹

Terms by Zierer and Wisniewski	Relevant statuses according to Zierer and Wisniewski (2019)	Questions posed by Hattie and Timperley (2007)
Feed-up	actual status and target status	Where am I going?
Feed-back	actual status and previous status	How am I going?
Feed-forward	target status	Where to next?

Feedback is highly efficient when it is high in information, meaning that it “contains information on task, process and (sometimes) self-regulation level” (Wisniewski et al., 2020, p. 12). These levels denote different aspects towards which the feedback is directed. Feedback on the task level addresses “how well a task is being accomplished or performed” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 91). The next level is that of the process which targets “the processing of information, or learning processes requiring understanding or completing the task” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 90). On the level of self-regulation, the recipient obtains information about the “control mechanisms of his or her performance” (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 16). The level of the self is left out in this consideration since it is “too often unrelated to performance on the task” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 90). Taking into account all these considerations, a very differentiated and complex image of feedback emerges that already suggests the amount of work that needs to be put into the implementation of student feedback.

Whereas traditional methods of eliciting student feedback made great demands on teachers and their time, digital student feedback provides a solution that fits the 21st century classroom. Aside from the teachers’ time expenditure before, during and after the lesson, handwritten student feedback can seldom be entirely anonymous since teachers usually know their students’ handwriting (Wisniewski, 2019, pp. 59–60). Furthermore, the elaborate processing of such feedback in spreadsheets or tally charts (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 66) surely dissuades many teachers from even considering student feedback. However, as Zierer and Wisniewski (2019) remark, “[t]hanks to digital instruments, the collection of meaningful and differentiated student feedback is also possible in a short amount of time” (p. 94). In many cases, the results of the feedback can immediately be shared with the class since the tools often analyze the results which can consequently make the elicitation of feedback more effective (Wisniewski, 2019, p. 60). In ad-

1 A detailed discussion of the steps and terms can be found in Hattie and Timperley (2007) as well as Zierer and Wisniewski (2019).

dition to other benefits of digital feedback, which unfortunately cannot be discussed in this contribution, the digital competence of the students is promoted, and the students are therefore being prepared for the digital society of the 21st century (Wisniewski, 2019, p. 58). On the teachers' side, a reduction in time and workload can be seen more than anything else. However, the feedback does not elicit itself. The teaching idea proposed in this paper is meant to provide guidance in that respect.

3. From Theory to Practice: The Teaching Idea

When using digital student feedback to improve teaching, it is beneficial to work through the three questions suggested by Hattie and Timperley (2007). In the following section, the process will be illustrated through the fictitious elicitation of student feedback regarding the teacher's setting of tasks (see also the Appendix for details).

3.1. Feed-up: Where am I going?

The first step in eliciting student feedback is the identification of an aspect on which feedback should be obtained. In line with the idea of feed-up, the target status for this aspect must be identified and described. As an exemplary aspect, the task instructions by the teacher are chosen here. Let us assume that the teacher notices that, even though they had prepared their instructions very carefully, the students seem to have trouble following those instructions. In a quick brainstorming activity, the teacher determines that a task is well-set when it is clear and understandable (both acoustically and regarding vocabulary) and when it does not contain too much or too little information. With this in mind, statements need to be formulated that address this target status (see 5.1 Feed-up) so that students can respond to them in the feed-back step. These statements should ideally deal with the task and process level.

Figure 1: Illustration of a Questionnaire with a Likert Scale in Oncoo

The screenshot shows a questionnaire interface with five statements and Likert scales. The interface is titled "ich stimme ..." and has arrows pointing left and right labeled "← ... nicht zu" and "... voll zu →". Each statement has a "k.A." button and a scale from 1 to 10. The statements are:

- I could always understand the tasks acoustically.
- I always understood what I was asked to do.
- The teacher gave too much information when setting a task.
- The tasks were repeated unnecessarily.
- The teacher gave too little information when setting a task.

At the bottom, there is a green button labeled "Bewertung absenden".

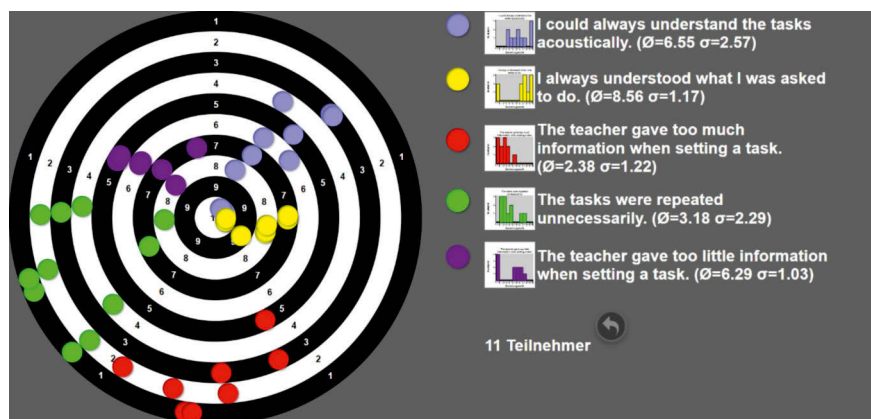
In the next step, the statements need to be entered into the feedback app. As there are many options for digital feedback apps (see Stiehler, 2021, for an overview), the choice of

the ideal feedback app can be overwhelming for the teacher. To cite only a few examples, there is *Oncoo* for visual feedback, *Mentimeter* for quiz-style feedback or *AnswerGarden* for short comments or word clouds. In this teaching idea, the visual feedback tool *Oncoo* (Müller & Rohde, 2015–2024), where a questionnaire with answers on a Likert scale (see Figure 1) is transformed by the website into a visual representation of a target (see Figure 2), is chosen. To use this tool, neither the teacher nor the students need to sign up. However, the teacher can create a password to protect the results from the students. Once the statements are entered by the teacher, a code is provided that can then be shared with the students. This allows the whole class to give feedback anonymously.

3.2. Feed-back: How am I going?

During the feed-back step, it is finally time to ask the students. At the end of a lesson, the students receive the short code for the *Oncoo* questionnaire by sharing it or the QR code provided by the website (see 5.2 Feed-back). Consequently, the students can open the website on their mobile devices and enter the code to arrive at the questionnaire. On a scale from one to ten, the students rate their agreement to the prepared statements and then submit their rating. In real time, the five statements from the previous section are automatically assigned a section on the feedback target. When we look at the results for “I always understood what I was asked to do”, for example, the second section of the feedback target is considered. Each dot in this section represents one student answer. The closer the dot is to the center, the more the student agrees with the statement, i.e. when a student chooses 10 (I agree) on the scale, their dot is displayed in the very center of the feedback target. What we thus see in Figure 2 is that most students agree with the statement. Due to the visual representation of the results on the feedback target, the feedback can be understood very quickly. The target itself can either be immediately shared with the students or be kept hidden from them. It is here that the benefits of digital student feedback are most evident because the presentation of results is immediate and requires no special effort on the side of the teacher.

Figure 2: Illustration of a Feedback Target in Oncoo



3.3. Feed-forward: Where to next?

There are several ways to deal with the feedback results in the feed-forward step. The first possibility is that solely the teacher looks at the feedback and reflects on what can be done to reach the target status. Here, it might be a good idea to consider relevant literature in order to identify measures of possible improvement. The other possibility is to involve the students in the process so that they can once again engage in a dialogue on teaching and learning in line with the idea of pupil voice. Consequently, student ideas can play a role in teacher's development of the teaching and learning process (see Feed-forward). In this step, feedback on the level of self-regulation can be extremely valuable. If the students feel comfortable, they can suggest alternative actions to help the teacher regulate their performance. As a consequence of this "debriefing", the teacher should communicate which measures will be taken up in order to change the status quo (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 61). After a certain period of time, another round of student feedback should be elicited (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 61). When doing this, the teacher can see what has or has not changed. This process can and should be repeated until both teacher and students are happy with the teaching quality.

4. Conclusion

Implementing student feedback may appear like a big challenge if one has never done it before. It certainly "requires much skill by students and teachers" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 103) but it can also motivate teachers to "keep up a dialogue with students about teaching and learning" (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 76). Giving and receiving feedback is a skill that needs to be developed and especially with digital tools, there is "no 'golden path' of the correct methods" (Zierer & Wisniewski, 2019, p. 47). As such, the presented teaching idea is not a universal solution for gathering student feedback. Since *Oncoo* is a German website, it can be slightly adapted for the context of an English classroom in German schools, but the user interface remains German. However, many tools are available to explore and experiment with; and as feedback is a skill, learning by doing may be the best method to master it.

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5. Appendix

5.1. Feed-up

Statements about the task instructions

- (1) I could always understand the tasks acoustically.
- (2) I always understood what I was asked to do.
- (3) The teacher gave too much information when setting a task.
- (4) The tasks were repeated unnecessarily.
- (5) The teacher gave too little information when setting a task.

5.2. Feed-back

Table 2: Excerpt from a Lesson Grid: Setting of Tasks during a Lesson – Student Feedback Elicitation

Time	Step	Procedure	Media / Material
		...	
5 min	Elicitation of student feedback	<p>Teacher: <i>Before we finish our lesson today, I would like you to give me some feedback. As you know, even your teachers are not perfect and can always learn something.</i></p> <p><i>You will need your smartphone/your tablet/a school laptop to do this. In a moment, I will share a (QR) code with you. Once you follow the code, you will see five statements. Please rate your agreement to these statements on a scale from one to ten and please be honest.</i></p> <p>(The teacher shares the (QR) code with the students. The students scan/enter the code into their devices and react to the statements.)</p> <p>Teacher: <i>Thank you for reacting to these statements! We will talk about the results in the next lesson.</i></p>	<p>mobile devices for the students, internet access</p> <p>share the (QR) code for Oncoo (smart board/blackboard)</p>
2 min	Farewell to the pupils	<p>Teacher: <i>That's all for today! I wish you a great rest of your day and I will see you on Thursday! Goodbye!</i></p> <p>Students: <i>Goodbye!</i></p>	-

5.3. Feed-forward

Table 3: Excerpt from a Lesson Grid: Setting of Tasks during a Lesson – Student Feedback Debriefing

Time	Step	Procedure	Media / Material
1 min	Welcome students	Teacher: <i>Good morning, everybody! Welcome to class!</i> Students: <i>Good morning!</i>	-
10 min	Debriefing of feedback from previous lesson	<p>Teacher: <i>As you might remember, at the end of the last lesson you gave me some feedback about my teaching. I would like to thank you once again. This is really helpful for me as I am always learning how I can improve my teaching. Let's have a look at the results of the feedback and let's discuss what I could do to become a better teacher for you.</i></p> <p>(The teacher presents the results of the feedback and asks students whether they would like to comment. Once the results have been presented, the teacher asks the students what could be done to improve the teaching and learning in the classroom. The teacher should make very clear that it is safe for the students to speak their mind and that there will be no negative consequences should they criticize the teaching or the teacher.)</p> <p>Possible student answers for the example: → <i>The teacher could prepare the tasks in advance so that they are clear and carry the right amount of information.</i> → <i>The teacher could speak louder.</i> → <i>The teacher could stress tasks more, so that they are recognized as tasks.</i> → ...</p>	<p>presentation slide with the feedback results (projector, computer/interactive whiteboard/smart board)</p> <p>something to take notes with (for the teacher)</p>
		...	

