

Module 6 – Handout 5

Formative Assessment: Productive and Supportive Interactions

By Maja Wilson, PhD

Feedback is often helpful. But teachers don't always need to give feedback as part of the formative assessment process. That's because sometimes feedback can paralyze. Sometimes it can frustrate. Sometimes feedback can focus students on *how* they're doing when they need to be focused on *what* they're doing.

Sometimes, rather than providing feedback that tells students how their work compares to a standard, teachers can use their observations to further engage students in what they're learning in a different way. This kind of productive and supportive interaction sits next to feedback as an important formative assessment strategy.

Examples of productive and supportive interactions:

Non-Academic Example

As a young adult, I took my first and only horseback riding lesson from my mother. I was in the middle of my teacher education program and thus felt like I was an expert in teaching and learning. From the moment I saddled up, I peppered my mother with questions soliciting her feedback. *Was I holding my legs at the correct angle? Sitting with the correct posture? Should I bend my elbows a bit more?*

My mother humored me for awhile. As she adjusted my knee or straightened my arm, I grew self-conscious and even more awkward. Which increased the frequency of my questions! Finally, she let out a sigh of exasperation and told me to close my eyes and just feel what it was like to sit on the horse. She'd lead the horse slowly in a circle and I wasn't to say a word.

I resisted. After all, I protested, *students need lots of feedback, horseback riding students included!* But she insisted, and so I closed my eyes. After a few moments, my body relaxed, and I started to pay more attention to the horse. As I did so, my position adjusted without any feedback. At the end of five minutes, my needy questions were gone. My mother's supportive interaction allowed me to focus more on what I was doing and incorporate any feedback she offered more effectively later.

ELA Example

Mr. W is talking with a student about their first draft of an essay. Mr. W scans the draft quickly and starts the conversation by asking how the writing went. The student admits that they're not sure they've conveyed what they wanted to convey. Mr. W asks the student say more: what were they were trying to convey? The student launches into an animated story that is far more interesting than the essay itself, which is plagued by generalities and cliches. As the student wraps up telling their story, they ask, "So, was my essay terrible?"



Mr. W replies, "Some writers refer to the first draft as clearing the throat. It's like, you wake up in the morning and you haven't talked for 12 hours, so before you say good morning to your dog, you've got to clear your throat. What I can tell you is that the story you just told me had me on the edge of my seat. Why don't you consider your draft a little bit of throat-clearing, and start writing just what you told me?"

Mr. W doesn't offer feedback on the first draft, because, what's the point? The student didn't really feel like it conveyed what she wanted to, and the story she told in person did – and it was interesting! Why outline out all the flaws in something you're going to set aside in favor of a different direction? Instead, Mr. W frames the student's efforts (*throat-clearing*) in the context of the writing process, allowing the student to move on without condemning their previous efforts.

Math Example

I'm just so bad at math! I'll never figure this out! Ms. N has heard this before from her seventh graders. But the student sitting across from her after school, math homework at hand, is on the verge of tears. It's one thing to struggle with a set of problems. But to assign an entire identity to being bad at a subject? This is always something Ms. N wants to interrupt.

She asks the student why he thinks he's bad at math. The student explains that math always takes so long, unlike the "good math students," and he recounts staying inside at recess to finish times tables in elementary school. He points at the homework paper. "Isn't that a mess? I didn't do a single one of those correctly. I don't even think I finished any of them."

Ms. N looks at the homework. It is a mess, and she's not going to falsely reassure the student that it isn't. But the last thing the student needs is for her to go over all the errors he made. This moment isn't mostly about the math problems; it's mostly about how the student views himself relative to someone who is "good at math." And that's what she needs to respond to.

Ms. N thinks of an [article](#) she just read in *Scientific American* about unsolved math problems. She sets the homework aside and explains that a group of mathematicians released seven unsolved math problems 20 years ago. They challenged other mathematicians to solve them, and there was even a million dollar prize offered for each solution. 20 years later, only one of the seven problems has been solved. "Being fast and always getting the answer right doesn't make you good at math," she says. "Instead, it's about finding an approach to try next."

She takes it a step further and connects it to the homework between them. "Forget all the wrong answers here. Your homework has 10 of the same kind of problems. I'm going to give you two different approaches to try. Pick one problem and do it as slowly as you like. It doesn't even matter if you get the answer right, as long as you try the two approaches I'm going to share with you. If you do that, and keep going even when you get frustrated, I'm going to give you full credit for this homework. I guarantee that if you keep at it in this way, you're going to not only end up with correct answers, but you'll get faster in time. But right now, it's okay to slow down to let your math muscles build up. You should only try to speed up once you're ready."

This supportive interaction reframes the student's struggle as something that real mathematicians experience. Ms. N avoids giving feedback on the students' errors, shifting the focus to the student's problem-solving process and approach. It's not that she can't or won't ever focus on his errors. But in this moment, she needs to address the negative identity he's constructed from his experiences with math. She also finds a way to relieve the pressure to go too fast by reducing the number of homework problems for now in order to focus on strategies for getting through the frustrating parts of the problem.