

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title: *Can higher quality feedback lead to more growth in student writing?*
Year: 2012-2013
School/Grade: Byram Hills High School

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

I teach high school history and geography classes in Byram Hills High School. I teach AP juniors and seniors as well as freshmen. My research this year was focused on my three classes of AP US History students who are as a whole, highly motivated to get good grades and to do well on the AP US History exam in May. The amount of time I spend grading essays is enormous and I wanted to be sure this time was effectively used. The vast majority of my students improved their writing skills during the year, but for a few, I felt like I was making the same comments on their papers essay after essay. In a writing portfolio at the end of last year, one student said that he never read the comments. Why would a student not read the comments on their paper? And if one student admitted this, were other students also not reading my comments? Is this why some students seemed to make the same mistakes again and again?

Action Plan:

Step one was foundational. I needed to learn and revisit the topic of quality feedback. Therefore, my foundational research question was “What is Quality Feedback?” I was pretty sure the feedback I was giving students was quality, but I thought that before I explored the topic, I should revisit all the learning I had done previously on this topic, and find out what the new research was saying about Quality Feedback. I was sure that some of the things I had learned about feedback had been forgotten over the years and that I would be able to learn some new tricks.

Step two was the action research. After I collected data from multiple sources, I began to apply what I learned from my research in my classroom with my students. Thus, my action research question was “How can I use quality feedback to improve the writing of my AP US History students?” If I spent such an enormous amount of time making comments while grading essays, I wanted to be sure that was time well spent and that the feedback was helpful to the students.

Data From Research:

Happily, the September edition of Educational Leadership focused entirely on my research question. The topic was “Feedback for Learning.” I also read an article about Productive Persistence.

The key ideas I learned from my research were:

- Quality feedback focuses on steps for improvement. One teacher uses “STARS” and to indicate areas of success and “STAIRS” to indicate ways to improve.
- Quality feedback doesn’t give too much information to the students. A suggestion was made to underline areas that need improvement but don’t say what the problem is. Make the kids

figure out what was wrong. Another suggestion: Give back essays to students in groups of 4. Have the students match the comments to the essays.

- Quality feedback corrects big errors, not mistakes that the students can correct themselves.
- Quality feedback is face to face feedback. A dialogue is more helpful than written comments. This is because children need engagement and relationship, not praise and prizes.
- Feedback that promotes persistence helps students attribute their successes to their own actions, rather than their innate abilities or stagnant knowledge.

Data from my classroom:

1. I created a Survey Monkey for the students to take at the end of the first quarter based on feedback they got on this essay. I used the information from the articles I read about quality feedback to formulate questions. This survey asked them to rate areas of confusion in writing, rate types of feedback they find very helpful, and to describe in their own words “quality feedback.”
2. After another essay mid-way through the year, I collected data from the students in a three question open ended survey.
 - What is one thing you learned from the feedback on your essay?
 - Do you understand how to do better in the future? Explain.
 - What is one thing you did well on this essay? Why was this? Did you know what you were doing or did you just get lucky?
3. Personal Interviews – at the end of the school year I had a small group conversation with 7 students who represented both struggling and high achieving learners and students who seemed both eager and reluctant about feedback.

Results: Putting Research into Action:

The first result of my early research was that I changed how I gave feedback on their next essay. For example, I had previously written a (+) and a (-) on my students’ papers and described positive and negative aspects of the paper. This is because I had already learned of the importance of descriptive praise rather than evaluative praise. Underneath this description, I would write the grade. But on their next essay, I used the suggestion from Educational Leadership of STARS and STAIRS. I still made a chart, but instead of having a (-) sign, which can be a bit demoralizing, I drew stairs, to help the focus be on steps for future improvement rather than simply the negative aspects of the paper.

Additionally, in an effort to promote persistence, on high achieving essays, I wrote “you must have studied very hard. Repeat the process on the next test.” So that they would attribute their success to their actions, rather than their innate abilities or simple knowledge of the subject.

Also after the first survey results came in, I stopped putting the comments and the grades next to each other because 15% of the students admitted they don’t read the comments if they like their grade. After one essay, the students had to come see me for their grade, after another, I hid the numerical grade among the paper. Since 44% of the students who don’t read the comments cited lack of time as their reason, for the rest of the year, I gave the students class time to read the comments.

The new “Stars and Stairs” organization of my comments was rated as helpful by (62%), while a checklist with weak areas underlined was considered helpful by only (38%). I was surprised to find out that rubrics were rated helpful by only 16% of the students surveyed. Even general whole class discussions were rated as helpful by more students than rubrics. I was not surprised that seventy five percent of my students rated face to face conversations as very helpful but this motivates me to find time for more face to face feedback sessions. After another essay later in the year, I asked my students to label my comments themselves as a “star” or a “stair” so that I could check their understanding of my comments. I continued the Stars and Stairs method of feedback for the rest of the year and did not use rubrics and check lists as I normally do in the second half of the school year.

The survey that students took after a later essay indicated that much of the time I have spent giving them quality feedback was working. All but two of them could define a strength of their own paper, all of them claimed to learn something from the feedback, although four of them misunderstood my comments and learned something incorrect. All but four of them could clearly define how to do better on their next essay. This was especially encouraging information because a quarter of the students defined quality feedback as feedback that promotes future improvement. This feedback helped me evaluate for myself how much of my feedback was related to justifying the grade I was giving, and how much was aimed at future improvement.

The data from this survey supported an overall impression I had that my students made much greater and faster progress in their writing this year than in years previously.

Implications:

One thing that has become very clear is that I need to explore more ways to “flip” my classroom so there will be more time for face to face feedback on essays. This would be especially helpful early in the year.

Another important conclusion with future implications is that feedback needs to go both ways. I will continue to collect feedback from the students regarding how I grade their essays. The survey monkey was not hard to create and the data I collected was very useful so I will continue to do this at least one time a year in the future.

I would also like to focus more on how to craft my comments in a way that promotes persistence. This could involve both foundational and action research. Additionally, I was happy to see that the students recognize that quality feedback is “actionable” as the research calls it and will make efforts in the future to be sure my comments are less about justifying the grade, and more about future improvement.

Based on a conversations with my students, I realized there is a need to create a format for the students to collect the feedback they receive on their essays in one easy to access place. One of the reasons many students said they don’t read the comments on the last paper right before they write their next paper is that they can’t always find it. I created a “feedback journal” (see attached) for them to complete and keep handy in the front of their notebooks. This will hopefully encourage them to go back and read previous comments before they write their next essay. This will require more class time to be dedicated to feedback, but I expect it will be time well spent.

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AP US History Writing Journal

Directions: Each time you get back an essay, choose one star and one stair to focus on as a way to improve your writing.

Name of Essay	Writing Focus	Stars – keep doing these types of things!	Stairs- focus on this next time!
New England vs. Chesapeake DBQ	Thesis Development & Macro-analysis		
Entrenchment of Slavery Essay	Micro-analysis		
Unit 2 Essay			
Supreme Court Research Project	Thesis development & Micro-analysis		
Unit 4 Essay			
World War I DBQ	Using Documents Analytically (micro-analysis)		
Unit 6 Essay			
Unit 8 Essay			