

The use of immediate verbal feedback in the classroom

Rationale

The potential that effective feedback strategies has on the improvement of achievement, confidence and motivation is something that educators should strive to capitalise on. William & Christodoulou state that

“At its core, formative assessment stressed the need for assessment to be something that teachers and students respond to in order to reflect and adapt their practice” (2017, cited in Hendrick & Macpherson; 22)

This demonstrates how vital effective feedback is to the academic progress of our young people. Hattie (2003:5) has aimed to distinguish what the key features of ‘the expert teacher’ are and attributes providing feedback as one of these fundamental elements thus suggesting how as we strive to help all our young people in care, feedback must be a top priority.

The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) Standards for Professional Registration placed importance on engagement with enquiry and that practitioners should “know how to engage critically in enquiry, research and evaluation individually or collaboratively, and apply this in order to improve teaching and learning”. This enquiry would therefore be an ideal forum to assess the different ways in which our feedback impacts how our pupils learn and how they can progress.

Additionally, this enquiry provides a great opportunity to find out what particular forms of feedback work most effectively. Understandably, there is no ‘one fits all’ type of feedback equation that works for every learner. Feedback should be consistent yet varied. Despite these concerns, this enquiry has the potential to establish if there is a particular form of feedback that our learners prefer or find easier to put into their practice.

This ties in with another key element of the overall aim of the enquiry; can a specific variety of feedback raise motivation? There is a wealth of research on the links between both feedback and motivation. Fong et al (2019: 153) concluded that constructive criticism was found to be intrinsically motivating thus highlighting the profound influence we, as educators, have on our young people to remain resilient and driven. This enquiry will therefore hope to provide clarity on whether there is a direct link between immediate verbal feedback and instilling confidence in one’s ability and motivation to complete tasks.

Aim

The aim of this enquiry is to explore the impact of immediate verbal feedback during lessons and how this effects students’ learning, attainment and motivation. Additionally, this study will seek to identify the most appropriate method of feedback to move learners forward.

Methodology

The enquiry was conducted for a four week period with one S1 class. This specific class were chosen as enquiry focus due to their diverse learning abilities. Although all students received immediate verbal feedback when required, the focus was targeting six particular pupils. These pupils were selected on the basis of progress so far; two required challenge and as such the desire here was to ensure they have the tools to continue to perform well and sustain their high levels of motivation. The four other pupils selected had barriers to their learning, all to various extents and not on track in their progress. These pupils had the most potential to improve their work and understanding of the subject.

For the first two weeks of the enquiry, the focus of feedback was immediate verbal feedback with use of a stamp in their class jotter to confirm feedback had been provided along with initials of both myself and the pupil. The following two weeks, written feedback was the key focus. Verbal feedback naturally occurred during this time as well however was not formalised through use of a stamp. Previously submitted work and the standard submitted after the enquiry along with surveys taken through this period were compared.

Surveys

Overall, three separate surveys were conducted. One at the initial start of the enquiry, the second at the halfway point of the enquiry and a last one on the final day of the enquiry. The surveys had a variety of questions; a mixture of open, closed and score based questions. All learners took part in the survey to ensure inclusivity however six responses were analysed separately for the purposes of this enquiry.

Diary

Throughout the enquiry, a reflective diary was updated to note any key observations throughout the four week period. These observations were varied and analysed pupils' behaviour, motivation, comprehension of the topic, confidence and engagement within the class.

I used a number of strategies throughout this enquiry that was gained from further reading. As a practitioner, verbal feedback is a daily and important tool that I use. However, I found that I had to formalise this in a way to ensure that pupils, and perhaps parents, are clear that feedback that I am delivering has an overall objective.

Findings

Despite the enquiry highlighting varied themes around feedback, overall it was clear that verbal feedback was very effective across all learners in a variety of ways. I found that across the board the standard of work being produced improved when verbal feedback was provided with use of the feedback stamp. This had a mostly positive impact on the pupil's end of unit assessment that took part during the four week period compared to prior results as well as the quality of work in their jotters. Pupils' confidence and motivation also improved in the classroom during this period and it was clear that they all enjoyed getting a stamp added to their jotter.

One particular example that demonstrated how verbal feedback improved the pupils' standard of work was during week 1 of the enquiry. The pupils were asked to complete a History skills question. This was a literacy heavy focused lesson that incorporated the skill of assessing the effectiveness of source based evidence as well as identifying missing evidence. This is a challenging piece of work and was therefore a perfect activity for measuring the effectiveness of verbal feedback. After the initial instruction of the activity was complete, I approached pupils to ensure they were on task and provide feedback as appropriate. What was clear at the time, and from my reflective diary, that positive change in the majority of pupils' work improved much quicker. Some were able to reproduce feedback straight away and to a good standard. It was clear that they understood the action that was required and did so immediately.

Overall, I saw a very positive impact on achievement amongst my learners. In week two of the enquiry, our class practiced the aforementioned activity for a second time to measure the pupils' ability to carry out past feedback. The verbal feedback stamp was used again in the same manner and

I found that with the higher attaining pupils, they did not need as much targeted feedback compared to other pupils. This could be for a variety of reasons but one particular hunch is that these pupils remembered their feedback from last time and their confidence was improved.

In terms of motivation, from my observations and reflective diary, it is clear that pupils were much more willing to tackle this type of activity than before. The biggest impact I could sense from my own professional judgement was that it had the most profound impact on learners who were not on track. Those pupils who were struggling with the activities demonstrated happiness and excitement when they acted upon my personalised and one-on-one instruction. They were happy with their success and their progress. Providing verbal feedback, as well as use of the stamp, provided the tools for these pupils to achieve the desired learning intention and success criteria.

From analysis of my survey, all pupils enjoyed receiving instant verbal feedback and found it beneficial. Pupils who require challenge demonstrated a longing for feedback that showed if they were on track or not, as well receiving praise for their good quality of work. Other pupils stated in their survey that at times they found it sometimes difficult to always put my verbal feedback into their practice but that it did bridge the gap in terms of pace. For example, one particular pupil noted

“I find that I don’t always understand things and sometimes it’s too fast for me. When the teacher talks to me by myself this helps.”

Therefore this small enquiry has demonstrated that the use of instant verbal feedback has an important part to play in the classroom. To ensure that I was meeting my stated aims in which to find out how this pairs up with other forms of feedback, I also measured the pupil’s attitudes towards written feedback. During the two week period where written feedback was the focus, I found that there was not as much of an impact in terms of motivation. Whereas with verbal feedback, pupils were visibly happy with understanding how to better their work, I found that pupils either did not read their written feedback or did not take it on board as much as they did with verbal.

There was a clear disparity between the two main set of pupils. The pupils requiring challenge, ones who are already motivated towards academic success, did like getting written comments in their jotter as it provided them with direction on how to keep progressing. A common theme throughout their survey was that they enjoyed getting comments with praise for their good effort. Analysis of their answers showed there was a clear parental engagement implication. It was indicated in the results of the survey that most of these pupils’ parents checked their jotter’s for teacher comments which shows that not only do children benefit from written comments but this is also an effective tool to communicate with parents and carers.

In terms of the pupils not on track, they placed less importance on written feedback. When asked if they even check their jotters to see if written feedback has been added, a majority answered that they did not check. It is clear that written feedback may be an uncomfortable proposition for those pupils who are not on track in terms of their progress. Any comments that they deem a negative criticism may demotivate them and written feedback could act as a permanent reminder of their perceived failure. It was evident that overall, learners not on track preferred verbal feedback and through my own observations I found that written feedback had little to no impact on their motivation.

Implications for Future Practice

Overall, it would be fair to conclude that immediate verbal feedback has beneficial implications on learners. During this enquiry, it was clear that achievement had improved as well as motivation, confidence, resilience and ability to be a more reflective learner.

The study was conducted over a relatively short period of time and therefore future research would be required to truly understand how impactful this intervention was and can be. It would certainly better inform my own practice and ability to deliver effective feedback if this enquiry was widened and continued.

In future, I will strive to use a variety of feedback methods. It is clear in my enquiry that there is still a valued place for written feedback both in terms of pupils' progression as well as engagement with parents and carers. However, this enquiry did demonstrate to me, in a way I did not appreciate before, that instant verbal feedback is a powerful instrument that provides pupils the tools to strive. Continued use of the stamp will be an important part of my practice as it was clear that all pupils, regardless of ability, enjoyed receiving an appreciation of the work they had completed that was a little more permanent than instant verbal.

References

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