How to Help Students Accept Constructive Criticism: 'Wise' Feedback

Teachers of middle and high school students know that these learners sometimes require pointed critical feedback on academic assignments to shape their learning. The *reason* that most instructors put substantial effort into providing often-detailed performance feedback is clear: to benefit the student. But many students—particularly those at risk of academic underperformance or failure—may instead misinterpret critical instructional feedback as a sign that the teacher lacks confidence in and is negatively biased toward the learner.

A factor that can contribute to students' negatively skewed view of instructional feedback is that it is often ambiguous, presented without an explicit context for understanding the intention behind it. This ambiguity leaves learners free to impose their own interpretations—for example, regarding a teacher's written or verbal feedback about an assignment as a sign either of caring and commitment or a curt dismissal of the student's abilities (Yeager et al., 2013). And, in fact, there is evidence that a tendency to construe teacher feedback in a negative light is more common among those students already sensitive to being stereotyped because of social characteristics such as race, gender, or economic class (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager et al., 2013). An African-American student, for example, might interpret a White teacher's written feedback on how to improve her research-paper draft as picky, unfair, and driven by racial bias rather than as representing a genuine desire to help the learner advance her writing skills. As a result, the student fails to heed and apply that adult feedback.

Wise Feedback: Supplying a Proactive, Empowering Explanation. Teachers can reduce the tendency of at-risk students to discount evaluative statements as biased by formatting those statements as 'wise' feedback (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager et al., 2013). The teacher structures written or verbal feedback to include these 3 elements:

- *Feedback description.* The teacher describes the nature of the feedback being offered.
- *High standards.* The teacher emphasizes and explains the high standards used to evaluate the student work and generate the instructional feedback.
- *Assurance of student ability.* The teacher states explicitly that the student has the skills necessary to successfully meet those standards.

The wise-feedback strategy appears deceptively simple but is powerful in application. Wise feedback prevents the student from misconstruing teacher comments as negatively biased by proactively offering an alternative, positive explanation: the teacher is giving detailed, ambitious feedback because the standards of the course are high and the teacher is confident that the student has the skills and motivation to meet them.

Wise Feedback: Examples. Here are 3 examples of teacher critical feedback formatted as 'wise' feedback:

Wise Feedback: Example 1: Research Paper with Written Feedback	
Feedback description	*Your paper met the basic expectations of the assignment but needs work. Please look over my comments.*
High standards	*You will see that I give detailed, critical feedback. This course sets the expectation that you will take your writing to a level suitable for college work.*
Assurance of student ability	*Your past assignments have shown me that you have the skills and motivation to use my feedback to revise and improve your paper.*

Wise Feedback: Example 2: PowerPoint Presentation with Oral Feedback	
Feedback description	*Review the attached rubric and my notes evaluating your recent science PowerPoint presentation.*
High standards	*This PowerPoint is an adequate starting point, but can be made better. Remember*

	the goal for this assignment is to create a presentation that showcases your communication skills to a potential employer.
Assurance of student ability	*I know from examples in your work portfolio and contributions to class discussion that you will be able to implement my suggestions and increase the quality and persuasiveness of your PowerPoint.*

Wise Feedback: Example 3: Opinion Survey with Written Feedback	
Feedback description	*I have looked over your sample survey form. It is going to need substantial revision, as you will see when you read my comments.*
High standards	*Your task is a challenging one: to develop a political survey that avoids leading questions and potentially biased language.*
Assurance of student ability	*From your previous drafts, I see that you understand the principles of survey development. As you will administer the final version of this survey to classmates, it is important that you use my feedback to polish it and then resubmit for my review.*

Wise Feedback: Additional Considerations. Like all teacher communication tools, wise feedback has constraints attached to its use:

- *Do not pair grades with wise feedback.* When possible, teachers should avoid attaching grades to any student work that contains wise feedback. Students tend to view a summative number or letter grade as the 'real' evaluation of an assignment and are therefore likely to ignore comments that accompany them (Yeager et al., 2013). So grades can 'short-circuit' the positive impact of wise feedback. The reality, however, is that the assignment of grades is usually unavoidable in course work. One strategy to keep wise-feedback and grading separate on an assignment is to return the first draft of the assignment ungraded with wise feedback. The student is then directed to use the feedback to revise the assignment and submit for a grade.

- *Make student feedback 'ambitious'.* In an attempt to bond with unmotivated students, the teacher may commit the errors of over-praising them for mediocre work or providing only easy suggestions for improving the assignment. Either strategy sets a low bar for performance and can backfire. When students sense that instructors have limited expectations of them, they can feel patronized and stereotyped, lose motivation, and further withdraw effort from academic tasks (Yeager et al., 2013). Instead, the teacher should praise work that truly deserves it and offer thoughtful critical feedback that, relative to students' current abilities, taxes them to stretch and expand their skills in a meaningful way.

- *Use wise feedback with large groups*. Although wise feedback is an excellent tool to communicate teacher expectations to individual students, it is just as powerful (and much more efficient) when communicating with the entire class. For example, before handing back graded math tests containing detailed critical feedback, a middle-school math teacher prepares the class, saying:

(High standards) *"By grade 7, students are expected to have fully mastered the many math concepts and operations taught in the earlier grades."*
(Feedback description) *"When you look over this diagnostic math test that you took last week, you will see that I have written a number of comments highlighting where you made errors or failed to show or explain your work."*
(Assurance of student ability) *"Judging by past work that I have seen from each of you, I can see that you all have the skills to be strong math students. My comments will point you to where you should put additional effort to ensure success in this course."*

References

Cohen, G. L., Steele, C. M., and Ross, L. D. (1999). The mentor's dilemma: Providing critical feedback across the racial divide. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 25*(10), 1302-1318.

Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A., Hessert, W. T., & Williams, M. E. (2013). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*, 804-824.