

Feedback - Noise or Music to the Ear?

Dr. Michael Bunch, Sr. Vice President of Research and Development

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DR. MICHAEL BUNCH

Among the complaints most teachers have about end-of-year tests is that they provide little or no actionable information about students, at least for the current school year. Even interim assessments, given three or four times a year, may not yield timely feedback, especially if portions need to be sent out for hand scoring of open-ended responses. For test feedback to be useful, it has to be tangible, transparent, actionable, customized, timely, ongoing, and consistent. That's a tall order.

Formative assessments, which can be given at any time, promise all the qualities of useful feedback, but they sometimes fail to deliver because they are technically flawed: they lack reliability, or they don't capture critical aspects of the curriculum, or they take so long to grade that by the time they are graded, everyone has moved on.

What if we combined the best qualities of standardized summative and interim tests with the best qualities of formative classroom tests? What would those tests look like? Would they look like tests at all? What should they look like?

If the primary objective of education is to foster learning, then it seems reasonable that every aspect of the enterprise should do so. The framers of the Common Core State Standards understood this objective and structured the language arts content standards accordingly. Writing, for example, includes writing in response to reading. Students write about what they have read, and in the process, they learn something they had not known before. In writing about what they just read, students reinforce that new knowledge. If the writing assignment specifically calls for analysis or synthesis or some other higher-order thinking skill, students get to exercise a different set of cognitive muscles than if the writing assignment only requires recall of details or main ideas. Now they are learning not only new content but new ways of using and even owning that content. Owning the content is what learning is all about.

If we take that process a step or two farther, providing feedback on what students have written about what they have just read, we can reinforce not only their acquisition of new knowledge but their retention and ability to manipulate that knowledge as well. Retention and ability to manipulate are a big part of owning the content. We can promote student ownership of that content, but we have to be quick about it. Students, and indeed all of us, forget quickly.

What does that feedback look like? Sarah reads "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" and a synopsis of the Greensboro Four, views the "I Have a Dream" speech on YouTube, and writes an essay about the Civil Rights Movement. It's quite possible that Sarah has already learned quite a bit, even if her essay isn't very good. But we can improve the quality of Sarah's essay through

feedback, and in the process, we can enhance her ownership of the content of that essay. Specific aspects of that feedback will include critiques of the following:

- organization, word choice, fluency, and mechanics of the essay
- tone, logic, and audience-appropriateness of the essay
- use of details from the sources in bolstering the points of the essay
- fidelity of those details to the original sources (i.e., accuracy)

By providing Sarah feedback like this, especially if we do it quickly, we offer her the chance to rework her essay, perhaps going back to the sources, rereading or reviewing them with a more critical eye and ear, mulling the content over in her mind, rethinking her essay, and coming more and more to own that content. If Sarah turns in her revised essay, and we provide similar feedback quickly and thoroughly, Sarah has a chance of learning not only a bit of American history but a lot about good writing as well. If Sarah continues to write, and if we continue to offer feedback until she has produced an excellent essay, chances are she will retain not only the history lesson but the writing lesson the rest of her life.

How do we make that feedback tangible? We ground it in the specific content of the sources and the content standards addressed in the assignment. We offer specific suggestions on how to improve in each of the areas we critiqued. And we highlight specific elements of the essay that are already good.

How do we make the feedback transparent? We make the assignment explicit and critique the essay strictly in accordance with the assignment. We spell out our criteria and stick to them. We grade Sarah's essay by the same standards as all the other essays we receive from her class.

How do we make the feedback actionable and customized? By pointing out specific strengths and weaknesses, directing Sarah to additional resources (such as tutorials on spelling, sentence structure, vocabulary choice), and suggesting ways to strengthen weak sections of her essay, we are providing customized, actionable feedback.

How do we make the feedback timely, ongoing, and consistent? We stay up all night grading Sara's essays and dozens of others very much like it, and then we stay up all the next night grading the revisions, and every night thereafter for the rest of the semester grading further revisions. In this sleep-deprived state, we are also able to remember exactly how we graded the first set of papers, what criteria we applied, and what kinds of advice and suggestions we offered.

There are, of course, alternatives to a lifetime of sleepless nights. While teachers spend their time planning and delivering instruction (and occasionally sleeping), assistants can take over the scoring and feedback duties. These assistants will need to be trained, of course, and there will need to be lots of them to provide feedback on the many essays and revisions of essays

coming their way.

But many of the skills required to score and provide feedback on student writing can be and have been taught to computers. Computer scoring and feedback, in addition to being fast and therefore timely, are also, by nature, ongoing and consistent. PEG, Measurement Incorporated's automated scoring program, has been trained to score and provide timely, ongoing, and consistent feedback that is also tangible, transparent, actionable, and customized.

A typical session with PEG presents a writing prompt – in essence, a written assignment. The assignment, depending on the type of writing selected by the teacher, may or may not include reading passages or other stimulus materials. Once the student writes and submits an essay, PEG scores it in a few seconds and provides feedback on several aspects of writing (content, organization, support, word choice, sentence fluency, and mechanics). PEG also highlights mechanical errors in spelling and grammar and directs the student to online tutorials aimed at one or more of the weaker elements of the essay.

Feedback doesn't always have to be just noise. Provided in a tangible, transparent, actionable, customized, timely, ongoing, and consistent manner, feedback can help students own what they are learning. And that's music to the ear.

ABOUT DR. BUNCH

Dr. Michael B. Bunch is Senior Vice President of Research and Development at Measurement Incorporated. His expertise in the development of criterion-referenced, high-stakes testing programs is well known among assessment professionals. He contributes regularly to these programs through national organizations such as the American Educational Research Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Council on Measurement in Education. Dr. Bunch published (along with Dr. Gregory Cizek), the graduate-level text, *Standard Setting* (Sage Publications, 2007) and is in great demand as a reviewer and discussant for standard-setting research and as a leader of standard-setting activities.