Descriptive Feedback Tips for Teachers and Parents, Part 1

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Hey Teachers – and Mom, Dad, Uncles, Aunts, and Grandparents – When working with students, one thing we have learned over the years is the power of descriptive feedback. Students can learn without grades, but not without feedback. It really matters to student success and maturation.

Teachers, and now parents who are home for an extended period of time doing teacherly things with the next generation of family, you may be looking for practical tips and techniques on providing critical feedback as they learn – and yeah, these ideas can be used with other household interactions as well. Because there's a lot here and you might want to re-visit the narration later, I'll post the text of this narration on my website at www.rickwormeli.com/articles. There are two parts to this presentation, so be sure to watch Part 1 AND Part 2. Let's get started with Part 1!

Judgement and evaluation tend to invoke ego and self-preservation, not useful reflection and personal growth. Telling children that their work is poor, disorganized, and adding, "Did you even read the directions?," builds those defensive walls and increases anxiety. They can often pull back, and sometimes, they'll become overly reliant on the need for external validation before they try something, which we don't want. We thought we were being helpful with these comments, but we were really them off from investing in their learning, and really, just venting frustration at them.

In short, try to minimize anything that comes across as judgment or evaluation. We can still praise a child and share excitement about accomplishments – We're human and everyone needs a cheerleader from time to time -- but judgement isn't really helpful, when doing descriptive feedback.

So, try not to telegraph your own opinion about students' work. The goal is for children ***themselves*** to see the errors and how to fix them, or their successes and the decisions they made that led to that success. If we point these out to children ourselves, it makes them more passive in their learning – they don't own it and they disengage.

To help, consider making comments about their decisions, *NOT* the quality of their work, as describing quality is a slippery slope into judgement. Judgements tend to be considered by recipients as, "high stakes," and unchangeable, which can create moderate panic and grind learning to a halt.

In the first years of my own teaching, I read a book by literacy expert, Marjorie Frank, called, *If You're Going to Teach Writing, You Gotta Have This Book,"* (cool title, eh?), and I was inspired by her comments that, if we always mark-up students' everyday punctuation and spelling errors in their writings, they will only use words they know how to spell and sentences they know how to punctuate, never venturing further,

never wrestling with ideas through writing. As a result, they don't grow as writers and thinkers; we lose a major learning tool. It was the first moment I realized the inhibitive nature of judgement. That year, I transformed from one who judges everything students do, thinking it was good feedback, to one who helps students do the heavy lifting: Students do the majority of reflecting on their decisions and their outcomes, not me.

Here are some examples of feedback that comment only on the decisions students made, not the quality of the work. Notice, too, that none of them "telegraph" opinion about the student's work:

- "You included one piece of evidence for each claim. Notice here in the directions that you were asked to include two or pieces of evidence per claim. What would you like to change?"
- "You used all four suggestions for compelling introductions, and as a reader, it made me want to read the rest of your paper. Thank you for that."
- "You split your notebook into a double-entry journal, placing notes on the left side, applications on the right. How did that work for you?"
- "You accounted for the amplitude of the wave. As a result, what can you now tell me about energy outputs that you couldn't tell me before?"
- "You cleared 8 of the 10 hurdles. What did you notice about the run, and what would you like to try differently in the next one?" *[Notice that this is just the raw data, no opinion of the run as good or bad for the student is offered.]*
- "I noticed you used 500's for your vertical increments on the graph. Why did you not use 50's or 1000's?" *[Here we would hope students would comment on how using anything other than 500's would give a false interpretation of what actually happened in the situation. Notice that we use descriptive feedback EVEN when what they have done is correct. Half of descriptive feedback is explaining why things are correct, not just using it when things went awry.]*

H**ere are a few examples from a student using the same idea:**

- I used distilled water in the lab. As a result, I do not have as many contaminants potentially affecting my lab results.
- I arched my back on the dismount. Because I arched my back, I am able to make a fluid transition into the next element of the routine.
- I isolated the variable to one side of the equation sign so I could plug in for x to get y and determine the coordinates to plot on my 4-quarant graph.
- I tied my shoe using a bow today, and it didn't fall off!
- When I color with my crayon next to the ruler, it makes my picture a square.

Basically, we're operating as a mirror here, reflecting back to students what they did, but not judging it. As far as I know, outside of "Snow White," mirrors don't judge us.

This approach is similar to the, “Point and Describe,” strategy described by Jim Fay and David Funk in their popular book, *Teaching with Love & Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom* (1995). Just as the authors suggest doing when trying to teach students self-discipline, we can use the strategy to teach children to take charge of their academic learning. We help them make a connection between decisions made and the consequences, good or bad, of those decisions – ‘a big step toward self-efficacy.

To coach like this, consider memorizing and using 5 or 6 of the following starters for your feedback with your children:

- Tell me more about…
- What does that tell you?
- I hear you saying….. Is that what you intended to say?
- How does this match (or differ from) the example given?
- I noticed you…., and as a result, ….Was that your goal?
- What do you mean by….?
- Can you give an example of….?
- What have you tried so far?
- Did this work – How do you know?
- If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?
- What have you tried in the past, and what was the result?
- I wonder what would happen if…?
- How do you feel it went?
- How will you begin? What will you need for that?
- Imagine yourself at that point in the project – What will be going through your mind?
- What would you like me to look for as I watch (or read) this?
- Will that get you the accurate information you need? Why or why not?

Useful feedback really works well when students can self-monitor their progress toward a goal. This means they can tell us what they are supposed to be learning and where they are in relation to that learning at any given point in the journey. So, ask them:

- What are you supposed to be learning here? (Alternatively: What’s the objective/standard you’re supposed to achieve?)
- Where are you right now in relation to that goal?

Author/Educator LeAnn Nickelsen reminds us that setting clear, obtainable goals and monitoring our steps toward those goals are huge factors for motivation and cultivating perseverance (Nickelsen, 2016), so let’s tap into that!

This is the end of part 1. Part 2 offers multiple, specific, descriptive feedback techniques readily applicable to most classroom subjects for both teachers and parents to use right away. Be sure to watch it as well.

This is part 2 or our 2-part video on descriptive feedback techniques for teachers and parents. Please be sure to watch Part 1 first, as it will help with processing the content of Part 2. This video lists multiple techniques for descriptive feedback. Feel free to pause the video while watching it in order to understand particular techniques a little better. Let's continue now from Part 1:

As we can, let's spend time asking students to compare their efforts to the given example. Place a successful version of what students need to do in front of them, then ask them to write a letter (or some form of expression) to us describing three elements:

- How does their product/performance match the example of excellence?
- How does it differ from the exemplar, and what would they need to do in order for it to match? Alternatively, if children think their product or performance is of higher quality than that of the exemplar provided, ask them to make that case and prove it.
- This approach is really a riff on the most popular definition of descriptive feedback:
    1. State the learning goal
    2. Describe where the student is in relation to the goal
    3. Identify what needs to happen in order to close the gap between the two

Two notes of caution here: First, if we make the example of excellence so far beyond a student's capacity to create, we push students away from investing in the feedback and assignment. It becomes easier for them just to give up. Don't be too perfect in your examples.

Second: While it's true that analyzing one's position in relation to a preferred goal helps us achieve that goal, it's also true that sometimes we need to start a journey without a predetermined goal, nor do we want to limit the next generation to what the current generation thinks is excellent – They could surpass us, which is a great thing! This kind of messy learning has led to many scientific discoveries, works of art, popular consumer products, and powerful writings across the years. A subset of this idea of not laying out a pre-determined goal for students is to let them start with a tentative goal, but allow the goal to change as the result of new perspectives experienced while working towards the original goal. This is deeply valuable for creative endeavor.

For example, children may be writing a wonderful compare and contrast essay, but in the midst of it, they decide to transcend convention, and reflect on the power of a writer's voice to discern among subtleties or aesthetics while comparing, or they may realize what they are preparing is much more evocatively presented as a graphic novel, a two-act play, a new classification system, or an on-line role-playing game they design themselves. As their teachers and parents, we consider: Is this the moment to relinquish our own imaginations for what could be? Do we limit our children's potential to an older generation's definition of success?

Another great technique for descriptive feedback is, "Here's What, So What, Now What," based on John Driscoll's "What?" Model for Structured Reflection (1994, 2000). Here's the sequence:

- **Here's What:** describe the cold facts without commentary, similar to the examples above.
- **So What?** The parent or teacher or preferably, the student, makes the connections and draws the larger conclusions. Examples: "So, those are the adaptations cold blooded animals have to make in order to live in the desert." "Now we know that all these other colors come from just these three primary colors," or, "Using hundreds instead of thousands between each mark on the vertical axis avoids any misinterpretation of the data that might happen when using other increments." We're asking what the data/feedback says to us, what patterns we perceive about the student's learning.
- **Now What,** is the place to identify next steps and new questions in the learning. Examples: "Let's check your two other graphs to make sure the vertical and horizontal increments create an accurate portrayal of the data," "Let's consider how we might portray the data if we were preparing the report for a different audience," "What other ways could the data be visually portrayed so as not to distort conclusions drawn from the data?," or, "If the data was displayed differently, such as a representative landscape, a radial plot, a mosaic, or a pie chart, would the data be more useful to its user?"

One thing to consider when providing helpful feedback: *Who is doing the thinking, and thereby, the learning?* If we edit children's work ourselves, we learn a lot, but the child learns little. So, let's turn this around, and limit our editing of our children's work. Let's get them to do it instead: They'll learn more, and once again, they'll take more responsibility for their learning, and even better, they won't make these same mistakes again. Here are three ideas for doing this:

1. If you notice an error in a sentence or math calculation, place a dot or pair of cartoon eyeballs at the end or beginning of the sentence or near the portion of

the math problem's calculations with the error, but don't identify what the issue is. The dot indicates that an error is present and needs to be corrected. If your child needs a hint, provide either an example without the error in it and ask him to compare the two, or offer minimal clues, such as "Agreement," "Sum of the Angles," or, "Coniferous trees," according to the subject. When using this method, you may want to do it with shorter chunks of the assignment, as the number of dots can add up and be overwhelming.

2. For a variation on this idea, watch, "Highlighting Mistakes: A Grading Strategy," on Youtube.com in which Pre-Algebra teacher, Leah Alcola, simply highlights the errors in students' math work, but they have to figure out what's wrong and make corrections, talking through their thinking with classmates. I've tried this – It works well!
3. Item Analysis Chart with Letter of Reflection – This idea is based on the item analysis chart described in their book, *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right - Using It Well* (2007, 2013) by Rick Stiggins, Jan Chappuis, Steve Chappuis, Judy Arter and others at the Assessment Training Institute:
    - Once a test is graded or a practice assignment has been marked or received comments, the student collects the assessment back from the parent, teacher, or classmate and completes an Item Analysis Chart about his performance on the assessment. This is just data collection chart or graphic organizer on which students record indicators of their learning, or lack thereof.

      A great thing here is that we can adjust the prompts on the chart based on which elements we feel our children need the most focus. We, or our students, depending on the situation, identify what we want students to analyze in the assessment, and those topics become the headers at the top of each column in the chart.

Here's an example chart *[the chart in the video is slightly different than the one you see here]* used for a quiz when upper elementary students couldn't perceive between careless mistakes and those mistakes made because they did not understand the mathematics required. Notice that the student fills out the chart, not the parent or teacher, otherwise, it's a passive, less effective experience. If the child prefers to use smiley and frowny faces, or the colors of the traffic light, green-yellow-red, to indicate understanding, that's fine.

Item	Topic or Proficiency	Right	Wrong	Simple Mistake?	Really Don't Understand
1	**Dividing fractions**		✓		✓
2	**Dividing Fractions**		✓		✓
3	**Multiplying Fractions**		✓	✓	
4	**Multiplying fractions**	✓			
5	**Reducing to Smplst trms**	✓			
6	**Reducing to Smplst trms**	✓			
7	**Reciprocals**	✓			
8	**Reciprocals**		✓	✓	
9	**Reciprocals**		✓	✓	

Once finished, the child uses the assessment and this chart to write a letter to the parent or teacher, including three basic parts as we see here:

Date

Mr./Mrs./Miss _____,

I understand....

I need assistance in....

I suggestion the following four steps for me to take in order to learn these content and skills:

Sincerely,

Teacher Signature:

Of course, many of our students may not have any idea about how to study content effectively, so we may need to brainstorm possible activities and strategies they can do to study content on their own or with a partner. We ask them to draw from these menus of options as they complete this third portion of the letter, but at least they are making the choice themselves rather than following a list of second party directives.

One final way to help the student monitor learning, and invest in their own education is the old standby used in classrooms around the globe:

"I used to think [insert old perceptions of a particular topic of learning], **but now I think** [Insert observations about how those perceptions have now changed]"

Well, gosh, let's do this one right now:

- “I used to think descriptive feedback didn’t matter that much in children’s learning, but now I see it’s more essential and helpful than grades are!”
- “I used to think descriptive feedback was only done by teachers, but now I see parents and students can do it just as effectively!”
- “I used to think I couldn’t do descriptive feedback, but now I have the tools to do it well!”

Parents and teachers, thank you for hanging in there with your children and their schooling during this challenging time. Your families and communities are worth it, even if it’s unusually tough. You have a lot of us educators willing to help, just ask.

If you’d like to give me feedback or converse further about assessment, descriptive feedback techniques, and grading, remember, you can reach me at rick@rickwormeli.onmicrosoft.com. Portions of this content come from my book, Fair Isn’t Always Equal, 2nd Edition, published by Stenhouse Publishers. If you’d like to learn more about assessment, grading, feedback, differentiation, and more, the book is available at www.stenhouse.com, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble.

Thanks for all you do for the next generation!