

Providing Feedback

Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Feedback is a way of helping another person consider changing his/her behavior. Through feedback we learn to see ourselves as others see us. The key ingredients are care, trust, acceptance, and openness.

1. It is descriptive rather than evaluative.
2. It is specific rather than general.
3. It takes into account the needs of the receiver and giver of feedback.
4. It is directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about.
5. It is solicited, rather than imposed.
6. It is well-timed.
7. It is checked to insure clear communication.
8. When feedback is given in a training group, both giver and receiver have an opportunity to check with others in the group the accuracy of the feedback.

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Whatever Happened to Individual Corrections?

By Joan E. Heaton

“Wish he would tell me how *I’m* doing!” This was the comment made by my classmate as we rode up the chair lift together. Last spring I spent a week skiing in Colorado. Since powder skiing was relatively new to me, I decided that the best course of action was to take ski school lessons. I paid my money and “got in line” for the ski-off. (I can’t tell you the relief I felt when I was placed in the top class!) The lessons progressed as ski school lessons normally do and everyone seemed very happy. But, as our lessons continued, the discussions on the chair lift changed to indicate a growing discontentment. My “chair partners” were asking, “Why doesn’t he tell *me* what *I’m* doing?” “Why doesn’t he talk to *each* of us specifically?” A lady told me that she never seemed to know if she was doing it right or not! Another lady summed it up by saying, “Whatever happened to individual corrections?”

The move away from the use of individual correction is evident in our association's workshops and clinics. This could be an effort on the part of the association to eliminate the embarrassment and anxiety experienced by some students as a result of the faulty manner in which "individual" correction is given. However, it is also evident that to eliminate the use of individual correction is not the answer to this problem. A keener awareness as to the proper use of "individual" correction is the solution. Perhaps an examination of "feedback" can be of help.

"If a person practices without knowing the results of his actions, improvement in his performance is unlikely." This quote from *Skill in Sport* by Barbara Knapp is based on extensive research in the area of "feedback." Lindsley reports that "a group of radar operators who were not enlightened about their progress on successive trials became less and less accurate as practice went on for six days." "Feedback" or "Knowledge of Results" is one of the conditions necessary to consider for effective learning. It is defined as that information provided to the learner in order to affect subsequent acts. The purpose of this article is to discuss "feedback" in conjunction with ski teaching.

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Individual and General Feedback

Feedback can be given on an "individual" and "general" basis. "Individual" meaning those corrections given specifically to one person. "General" meaning those corrections given to a group of students noting common errors within the group. However, in the latter situation, each performer is expected to consider the instructor's comments and in the learner's best judgment, decide which of the instructor's comments pertain to "his" performance. There is considerable doubt that many students have the ability to be so discerning. From personal participation in ski school lessons, clinics, and workshops, it seems that a shift from using "individual" to "general" correction has taken place. This shift could be viewed as a solution to the problems with the ill-use of "individual" correction. It is not! "Individual" correction can serve the learner better than "general" correction. It is more specific and clearly given to a particular individual. This information serves as a guide to the learner in subsequent trials and assists him in analyzing the results of his actions. Although there are those instances in performances when a learner can assess the results of his own actions, such as shooting a goal in basketball, swinging a bat at a ball — the skills in skiing would seem to require assistance from an observer. However, the effectiveness of "individual" correction is dependent upon its proper administration. Extreme caution should always be taken so as not to embarrass or discourage the learner.

"General" correction can also be useful. If many students in a group are making the same error or if time is limited, the use of "general" correction would be the efficient approach. The shortcoming of "general" correction lies in its vagueness. The instructor is counting on the learner to have the ability to know whether or not the correction applies to *him*. For the most part, confusion occurs and the wrong students change their performance. In light of the information available pertaining to the effectiveness of "general" correction, it is thought that "individual" correction is more conducive to effective learning. Certainly, both "individual" and "general" corrections can be useful and each can contribute significantly to learning.

Positive and Negative Feedback

Feedback can be expressed in "positive" and "negative" terms. "Positive" referring to the use of terms describing affirmative action in the performance. Ex. "Push forward." "Negative" referring to the use of terms stating what should not be included in the action. Ex. "Don't sit back." Simply, instead of telling a student what "not to do" tell him what he "should try to do."

Educators are in support of the use of “positive” feedback because of its favorable effect upon the atmosphere of the class and its beneficial effect upon the student’s attitude toward subsequent learning. Traditionally, we hear, “Don’t do this” or “You didn’t do that” to the point that students become so discouraged that they resent and avoid the instructor. It is just as easy to say, Positive: “Stay on your edge!” as it is to say, “Don’t slip!”

It is also noted that all too often only the mistakes in a performance are mentioned. Somehow, the “good” is understood and the errors become the main discourse in the feedback. It is unfortunate when a student’s *only* communication with the teacher is when the learner does something “wrong.” There is a need for instructors to note the achievements of the learner as well as to make more mention of the successes. This supportive role coupled with the use of positively stated corrections can change the attitude of the student from discouraged to encouraged, from defeated to challenged, from “quitting” to taking future lessons!

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Concurrent, Terminal and Delayed Feedback

Feedback can be supplied *during* the action or *after* the completion of the performance. “Concurrent” refers to that feedback given to the learner during the performance. “Terminal” refers to that feedback given when the learner has completed the task. Terminal feedback can be administered immediately or any time after the task has been performed as long as *no* intervening activities have occurred. Students receiving feedback after the instructor has watched *all* members of a class “ski down the hill” are receiving “terminal” feedback. If the last student is the first to receive feedback, then his feedback is “terminal” and “immediate” all others would be receiving “terminal” feedback. If students were to engage in subsequent trials before the instructor gives feedback on the original trial, that feedback is referred to as “delayed.”

Feedback given *immediately* upon the completion of a performance is recommended. “...experiments in practical skill agree that the learner should be given as specific and as immediate information as possible.” Since the performer has just gone through “the motions” of the skill, he can reflect on his actions in light of the instructor’s comments. It is especially true in the performance of motor skills that as time elapses, both the learner’s and the instructor’s recollections of the performance become increasingly vague. The effectiveness of the well-intended feedback is further jeopardized when subsequent trials or other intervening activities are allowed to occur before feedback is given. It becomes increasingly difficult for the learner to recall the particular trial to which the instructor is addressing his comments in “delayed” feedback.

It has also been noted that “concurrent” feedback *can* be distracting to the performer. The instructor’s intended helpful cues *can* interrupt or break the performer’s concentration. Once again, the manner in which feedback is given is extremely important. Certainly, a word at just the right time, when something good is done or in error is made can work wonders! “The closer the exclamation is to the good movement or to the error, the easier it is for the learner to identify the right and wrong actions.”

The use of video taping can be an extremely helpful tool for providing feedback information. It enables the student to *see* in his performance what he may be unaware of or unable to *feel* as he performs. Video tapes also enable the instructor more opportunities to view the performance and thereby analyze more extensively and with greater accuracy. “In many complex skills, action is too fast for the detail to be observed by the human eye and other aids to analysis are necessary.” In order to make the best use of video tapes, it is important to view the tapes as soon after the performance as

possible. After viewing and analyzing the taped performances, time should then be provided for the students to try the skill under the watchful eye of the instructor. These trials soon after the visual feedback, re-enforce the learning to be gained.

The *quality* of the instructor's comments is also extremely important in effective feedback. Whether it be concurrent, terminal, or delayed, every effort should be made to say something that will be helpful. Comments such as "try harder" or "do it again" are simply not good enough. To say, "In order to flatten the ski, rotate the uphill ski." Instructors need to have considerable depth of knowledge of a particular skill so as to analyze the performance of their students and to give helpful, meaningful recommendations for future trials.

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Descriptive and Prescriptive Feedback

Feedback can also be described in terms that are *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. In ski teaching, it is often referred to as "detection and correction." Descriptive feedback refers to observations shared by the instructor with the student: i.e. "You turned your skis very sharply because you exerted pressure suddenly and at only one point in the turn." Prescriptive feedback refers to the instructor's recommendations for future performances: i.e. "Next time, smooth out your turn by exerting your pressure evenly as you form a big letter 'C'." With this information, the learner knows "what" he did, what he should "try to do," and "how" he can go about doing it. An effort should be made to state both "descriptive" and "prescriptive" feedback in "positive" terms.

In giving feedback, care must be taken not to embarrass, humiliate, or discourage the learner. Extreme care in one's choice of words is paramount, especially if "individual" corrections are to be given to a student "in front" of a group of students. Certainly, the best arrangement for "individual" correction is a private-type, one-to-one situation. For example: Instructor has class ski down to him, one student at a time. Each student is given individual, immediate-terminal, positive, descriptive, prescriptive feedback. Other students should be asked to *stand* away from both the instructor and the student so that feedback to *each* student can be private.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is thought that the solution to the problem of ill-administered "individual" correction is not to stop using it, but, to learn how to use it effectively. This writer is calling for the return and renewed use of "individual" correction in ski teaching. Instructors should know that in order for feedback to be most conducive to effective learning, descriptive and prescriptive feedback should be stated positively, immediately upon the completion of the performance, and in a one-to-one, private-type situation. Recommendations for future trials should be meaningful and with substance. It just isn't good enough to tell students to *turn* their skis, tell *each* student *HOW*..!

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