

Giving and receiving feedback

The way in which feedback is given and received during microteaching contributes to the learning process. Feedback that is vague, judgmental, ill-timed, or unusable is not as valuable as feedback that is specific, descriptive, timely, and practical. Similarly, although being criticized is often not pleasant, being open to well-intentioned, well-crafted feedback can only further professional development.

Here is a series of suggestions for how to give and receive feedback in a microteaching workshop.

1 Giving Feedback

When giving feedback:

Be specific rather than general. The more concrete the feedback is, the more useful it will be to the person receiving it. Thus, rather than saying, "Mike sometimes you weren't clear in your explanations . . .," tell Mike exactly where he was vague and describe why you had trouble understanding him.

Similarly, it is nice but not very helpful to say, "Joan, I thought you did an excellent job." Rather, list the specific things that Joan did well. For example, she might have motivated the problem effectively, used transitions advantageously, or communicated interest and enthusiasm. Tell her how these techniques contributed to the success of her performance.

Be descriptive, not evaluative. Focus on the effect the performance had on you, rather than on how good or bad you perceive it to be. For example, saying, "It's wrong to call on students when they don't have their hands up," is a generalization that may or may not be true in all cases. However, saying "I felt uncomfortable because you called on me when I didn't have my hand up," can help the person realize that students may have the same reaction.

Remember, too, that some of your responses will come from your own perceptions (for example, not everyone feels uncomfortable when called on). Thus it is good practice to begin most feedback with, "In my opinion . . ." or, "In my experience . . ."

Describe something the person can act upon. Commenting on the vocal quality of someone whose voice is naturally high pitched is only likely to discourage him/her. However, if the person's voice had a squeaky quality to it because he/she was nervous, you might say, "Barbara, you might want to breath more deeply to relax yourself, and that will help lower the pitch of your voice as well."

Choose one or two things the person can concentrate on. People can usually act on only a few pieces of feedback at any one time. If they are overwhelmed with too many suggestions, they are likely to become frustrated. When giving feedback, call attention to those areas that need the most improvement.

Avoid inferences about motives, intentions or feelings. To say, "You don't seem very enthusiastic about this lesson" is to imply something about the person her/himself. A better comment might be, "Varying your rate and volume of speaking would give you a more animated style."

2 Receiving Feedback

When you receive feedback, try to:

Be open to what you are hearing. Being told that you need to improve yourself is not always easy, but, as we have pointed out, it is an important part of the learning process. Although you might feel hurt in response to criticism, try not to let those feelings deter you from using the feedback to your best advantage.

If possible, take notes. If you can, take notes as you are hearing the other people's comments. Then you will have a record to refer to, and you might discover that the comments you thought were the harshest were actually the most insightful and useful.

Ask for specific examples, if you need to. If the critique you are receiving is vague or unfocused, ask the person to give you several specific examples of the point he/she is trying to make.

Judge the feedback by the person who is giving it. You don't have to agree with every comment. Think about the person's credibility when assessing the validity of her/his statements. Ask other people if they agree with the person's critique.

3 Summary

Be practical, tactful, and upbeat when giving and receiving feedback—both in the microteaching workshop and in your classes as well.