Useful Feedback, More Than Praise, Helps Students Flourish

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“Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” This proverb has become a cliché, but it remains a useful shorthand for self-sufficiency. If you want someone to succeed independently, give them the tools to do so.

Within the realm of education, this principle can inform the ways that teachers give feedback. For instance, it is often easier and quicker for educators to simply correct a student’s work. But this approach can take away a student’s opportunity to learn, grow and demonstrate that they can rise to the occasion. Indeed, what we often miss about “teaching a man to fish” is that this approach also communicates the teacher’s belief that the proverbial man can succeed at fishing. By giving feedback that allows someone to do the work themselves, you signal your expectation that they have the capacity to do it.

In a recent study, education professor Lisel Murdock-Perriera of Sonoma State University, psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt of Stanford University and I examined how feedback in the classroom can support student learning. That question is long-standing, but we explored a new dimension of feedback: agency. In this context, agency is the sense of control and freedom someone has when responding to a teacher’s comments. In what we call agentic feedback, teachers provide opportunities for students to independently revise their work, making the student an active partner in the revision process rather than a passive recipient of feedback. My colleagues and I argue that this approach can help kids thrive academically—and may be especially powerful for children from marginalized backgrounds. In fact, agentic feedback could be a key to improving equity and outcomes in many contexts, from the classroom to the boardroom.

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