



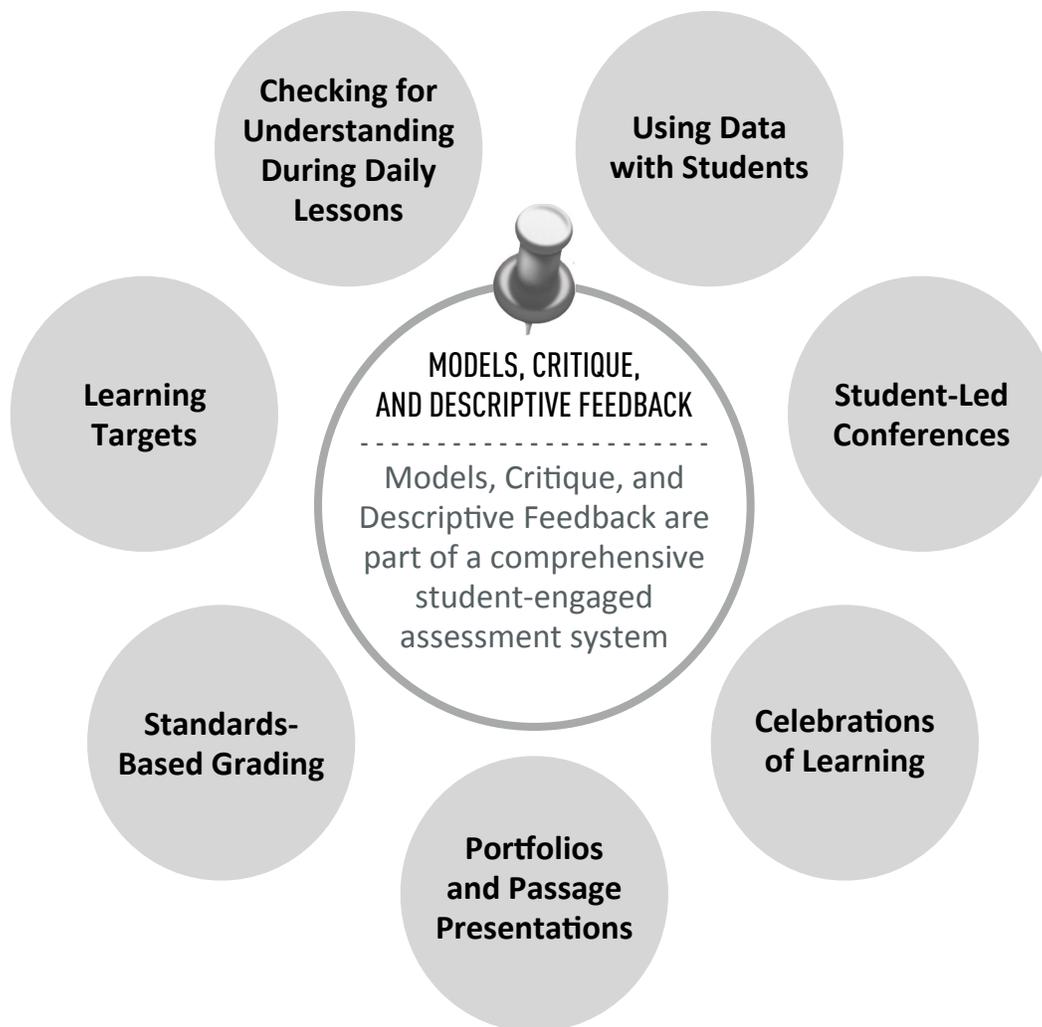
EXPEDITIONARY
LEARNING

PENDING PUBLICATION

Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback

Booklet Three of the Student-Engaged Assessment Toolkit: Supporting Common Core Success in the Classroom





Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback

Overview

Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback: Essential Classroom Tools

It is a challenge to think of a skilled profession that does not rely on models, critique, and descriptive feedback to improve performance. Imagine fields like medicine, journalism, or software development without clear models, and without continual critique and revision. Professionals in these fields know what a high-quality product looks like—whether it’s a Pulitzer Prize winning article or a gadget with record-breaking sales—and these models provide them with a reference point for productive critique and feedback that will allow them to improve their own work. Picture a ballet troupe without someone continually adjusting posture and position, or a basketball team never critiquing strategies during halftime, or analyzing their play on video. These practices, which help us improve, are essential in nearly every field.

Despite its prevalence in the world, this kind of on-the-job, on-the-spot feedback, based on strong models, is still strangely absent from many schools and classrooms. To be sure, grades and test scores abound, and occasionally students get assignments returned with comments, but these “results” are often thin, and too distant from the moment of learning or effort to be useful. Now more than ever, with the introduction of rigorous Common Core State Standards, students need models of work that meets standards and they need structured opportunities for critique and descriptive feedback so that they too can produce work that meets the standards. Students and teachers alike will benefit from *seeing*—sometimes even holding in their hands—examples of what they are aiming for.

Expeditionary Learning distinguishes between group **critique lessons**—sessions to build students’ common understanding of skills and quality (think of a medical team observing and analyzing an expert surgeon performing an operation)—and **descriptive feedback**—to improve a particular piece of work by an individual student (think of an editor working with a technical writer to improve a draft of a manual). These practices are not discrete—many times they overlap. Both share the goal of helping students understand what they need to do to improve. It is useful, however, to distinguish between them, as there are purposes and strategies for group critique lessons that are distinct from individual descriptive feedback, and teachers need to be adept at both.

Models: Exemplars of work used to build a vision of quality within a genre.

Critique Lessons: Whole class or small group lessons in which teachers use models to generate criteria for quality work.

Descriptive Feedback: Comments provided to an individual student to improve his/her work.

Both practices center on **models** of work that give students a clear vision of what they are aiming for and set standards for quality. It is difficult for students to understand what good work looks like in a genre unless they have seen it and analyzed it. Scoring rubrics are helpful for detailing the qualities in the work for which students will be assessed, but they do not provide a picture of what those qualities look like. We can create a rubric for a good jump shot in basketball or for a vivid descriptive paragraph, but to understand them we need to see them. Models bring standards to life.

Extended Definitions

Models are most often exemplars—not perfect, but strong in certain dimensions—though weak work can also be useful as a model, when used strategically to highlight common problems. Models are used in group critique lessons to build clarity and a vision of quality within that genre of work. They may be drawn from current or past classes, the teacher’s own work, or professional examples. Models are at the core of most critique lessons, but can also be used individually by students to calibrate their growth.

Group critique lessons help a whole class or a group of students generate criteria for quality work by using a single piece of work (or series of pieces/excerpts) as a model for critical analysis. Although there are many forms of critique in which an individual presents a piece of work to a group for feedback, the form of group critique proposed here is different. This form of critique is a

lesson, with clear objectives, and is designed to support the learning of all students, not primarily to improve the work of one. The teacher facilitates the critique as an engaging and compelling lesson in which students and teachers work together to define the qualities of good work in that genre, or to think about the ways all students can improve their work through revision.

Descriptive feedback helps an individual student improve a particular piece of work or an approach to a problem or performance, with the goal of helping him or her become a more skilled, independent learner. Peer-to-peer feedback is effective only when students are given a clear focus toward a particular aspect of the work, often based on a strong model, and the skill and background to analyze it effectively.



Descriptive feedback focuses on the individual.

Why these Practices Matter

Models, critique, and descriptive feedback are critical components of student-engaged assessment. The practices help students meet standards by giving them the tools they need to answer the question that paralyzes them so often—“now what?” Picture a student participating in a group critique of several introductory paragraphs of a scientific report, chosen by his teacher as a model. With his classmates he generates a list of the qualities that stand out as effective (e.g., hypothesis clearly stated). Later, when his teacher returns his draft, the feedback refers to the list of qualities and he is quickly able to assess the changes he needs to make to meet the learning targets for the assignment. Critique, descriptive feedback, and the use of models are all practices designed to give students a vision of quality so that they know what they are aiming for. Common dimensions of the practices illustrate the connection between assessment, learning, and student engagement:

Making standards real and tangible

These inter-related practices all begin with learning targets, which are derived from state and Common Core standards (for more information see the Learning Targets booklet). Learning targets *name* concretely what students are aiming for. Models, critique, and descriptive feedback *show* them what they are aiming for and how to get there. The practices provide tangible examples of what success looks like and what improvements will lead students to reach it. This clarity is essential for students, and also for teachers, who are better able to fairly and accurately assess students based on a common understanding of quality.

A mindset of continuous improvement

Critique and descriptive feedback are all about improvement and help students understand that all work, learning, and performance can be improved. Participating in critique and giving, receiving, and using feedback teaches students the value of effort and revision.

“I like models because they give a visual representation for people who learn better visually than by reading or listening.”

Paige, Seventh-Grade Student, Grass Valley Charter School, Grass Valley, CA

Responsibility and ownership of learning

Critique and descriptive feedback require student engagement. The practices emphasize skills of critical analysis and self assessment and ask students to make important decisions about their work and learning. Because the path to meeting learning targets is clearly defined by a shared vision of what quality looks like, students can work independently and build skills confidently.

Commitment to collaboration and a culture of safety

To be effective, critique and descriptive feedback require a commitment to the same basic guidelines—**Be Kind, Be Specific, and Be Helpful**. They require a deliberate and sustained attention to emotional safety and depend on skills of collaboration. A classroom can become a learning community dedicated to getting better together.

Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback in the Common Core Era

The Common Core State Standards themselves, with their precise, technical language, are not typically inspiring or evocative for students, or for that matter, teachers. However, they represent educational ideas and capacities that can genuinely be inspiring, when manifest in models of exemplary student work and performance. If students are given the opportunity, for example, to critique compelling student-created math solutions or research papers that represent what the standards are asking for, this can generate both excitement and clarity.

The **Common Core State Standards** were released in 2010 and are being adopted by an increasing number of states throughout the United States. They build upon the strengths of current state standards and create clarity and consistency in how knowledge and skills are taught across all K–12 schools. They are also informed by standards of other high-performing countries to ensure that students in the United States are prepared to participate in the global economy and society. The standards emphasize the following:

- Rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Alignment of college and career expectations
- Development of proficiency and independence of all students

www.corestandards.org

The standards represent a significant shift toward the higher-order thinking skills that underlie the critique process. The standards explicitly name critique habits and skills as a primary expectation for students. One of the eight foundational Standards for Mathematical Practice is: “Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.” One of the seven College and Career Readiness capacities of the English language arts standards is: “They comprehend as well as critique.” The math standards state, “students at all grades can listen to or read the arguments of others, decide whether they make sense, and ask useful questions to clarify or improve the arguments.” The ability of students to evaluate the validity and quality of reasoning and craftsmanship, citing evidence for their assertions, permeates the standards.

The skills and strategies described in this booklet, along with the other student-engaged assessment practices that make up this toolkit, will help all students rise to the challenge of the Common Core. Students need to

understand what the standards require and what work that meets the standards looks like; they need to compare their own work to those models; and they need to analyze what it will take to improve their work toward that goal. These practices require that students cite evidence, whether it is in the models themselves or in the rubrics derived from those models, that their own work meets criteria for quality. Building a culture of evidence is key to the instructional shifts required by the Common Core.

This booklet will provide teachers and school leaders with concrete strategies and tools to connect the use of models, critique, and descriptive feedback to the Common Core and, ultimately, to improved outcomes for students.

The **Common Core State Standards** require key instructional shifts in English language arts and math:

English Language Arts

- Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction and informational texts
- Reading and writing grounded in evidence from text
- Regular practice with complex text and its academic vocabulary

Math

- Focus strongly where the standards focus
- Coherence: think across grades and link to major topics within grades
- Rigor: require conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and application with intensity

Getting Started

Developing a Positive Culture for Critique and Descriptive Feedback

An essential starting point for critique and descriptive feedback in any classroom is ensuring that the guidelines **Be Kind**, **Be Specific**, and **Be Helpful** are the backbone of every class. Formal and informal feedback and critique flow from these. Safety and encouragement, as well as structure and clear learning targets, will set students up for success. Being transparent with students about the goals of a lesson engages them in reflecting on the guidelines, the process, and their progress.

Just about everyone has a “feedback nightmare,” a time when they felt hurt or judged by someone’s feedback or criticism. Some students are particularly vulnerable, especially if they have not experienced much school success and have received many messages of negative criticism (both implicit and explicit). School and classroom guidelines must be carefully built and reinforced, but individual feedback also must be tailored and shaped with the particular student in mind. There is not a template or cookie cutter approach that will work for every student.

Because group critique lessons often focus on exemplars from outside the classroom, they offer some distance from a student’s personal feelings, and reinforce skills students will need in their future careers, a key Common Core connection. They also represent a rich opportunity for students to experience what constructive feedback looks like and sounds like.

“Safety is hard to monitor—you have to be vigilant and firm, especially when building a classroom culture with a new group. Very young students often don’t realize they’re being mean. They can be candid even when it’s hurtful to others and need to learn how to word things differently. Older students, particularly adolescents, can be mean in subtle ways—complimenting work with a sarcastic tone or facial expression. It is imperative that the teacher stops the critique the moment problems happen, deal with unkind or untruthful comments or tone firmly, and re-establish norms. Eventually, students will both trust and reinforce the norms themselves.”

—Ron Berger, Chief Program Officer,
Expeditionary Learning

Building Culture Snapshot

Fourth Graders at Bowman Elementary School in Lexington, MA

“To build habits that establish a culture in which quality is the norm, I begin with a basic but demanding task that each student can accomplish, yet all can improve: the challenge of drawing freehand a straight line,” says Steven Levy, Expeditionary Learning school designer and former fourth grade teacher at Bowman Elementary School. “Through this assignment, I introduce, practice, and establish standards of quality that guide our work throughout the year.” Students develop the language, norms, and skills of describing quality through group critique as they analyze lines.

Levy assigns every student the task of drawing a straight line freehand and uses the work to demonstrate generating criteria, feedback and critique, revision, planning ahead, taking care of resources, and above all the norms of a safe, collaborative, constructive classroom. “Practicing these drawings is a particularly effective way to begin the year because everyone has equal access to the assignment. No one can do it perfectly, so everyone is challenged.”

“When students have learned this process of producing quality work, they are ready to apply it to more complex tasks. We now go through the same process to develop standards for writing, for presentations, and for major projects. We do not follow the exact steps in the line exercises for everything we do. Sometimes I give more explicit instruction or direction at the beginning. At other times, depending on the effectiveness of the students' work, I recommend additional critique sessions or more practice of discrete skills between drafts. The steps are simply tools and processes designed to help students take more responsibility in producing quality work.”

Choosing the Right Work Models

Because critique lessons are based on good models, the most important part of the lesson takes place before it even begins. Learning how to recognize and select powerful, generative models for critique lessons is essential and it takes practice. Models should show students where they are headed. The exemplars don't need to be perfect, but must be good models of the features that are connected to learning targets. Learning targets are goals for lessons, projects, and units, derived from standards, and written in student-friendly language (see Learning Targets booklet for more information). The more compelling the models are, the more powerful the critique can be. Ideally, teachers will begin building an archive of good work models from their own students or students in other classrooms that are gathered and stored for specific purposes. When a teacher needs to teach the product format/genre of a research paper, for example, she has a file of research papers by former or other students to draw from for critique lessons.

“I think the difference in math is that our models aren't 'products,' but ways of thinking. We critique our class exit slips often as models of thinking with the intent of helping students identify common misconceptions. We look for 'brilliant mistakes' that students can learn from and that lead to deeper understanding of the learning target.”

Lin Tarr, Math Teacher, William Smith High School, Aurora, CO

A teacher might choose to create exemplary models herself, or models with the types of problems she thinks her students will encounter. Models from the professional world can also be useful, and set a high and authentic bar, especially for older students.

If multiple models of current student work are used, it is important to choose samples that represent different approaches to the same assignment, or different strong features, so there is little duplication in what is viewed and discussed. There should be a specific reason for each piece chosen. If the class is going to spend valuable, whole-class time considering a piece, there should be a clear reason that relates to the goal of the critique.

Modeling with weak work: While it is most important to have exemplary models, it can also be useful to have examples of pieces that are poorly done in different ways, particularly in those areas that the teacher feels her current students may find challenging. For example, to help students remember to be less repetitive with sentence structure in a composition, it can be very powerful to have them critique an anonymous student composition that is fraught with repetitive language. The image of this weak work will stay with them and can be discussed regularly to remind the group to be careful to avoid its pitfalls.

When using weak work, there are some cautions. First, the work must be anonymous. Students should never be able to recognize it as the work of a current or former student. Second, the work must be treated respectfully. Modeling mean-spirited critique will promote an unkind classroom climate. Lastly, not all weak work is a good choice. Ideally, the work is compelling in its flaws—for example, if it is very strong in some areas but confusing in others it can invite wonder and analysis. The best weak work is not an example of a student who wasn't trying, but rather a student who was putting in effort but had confusions that resulted in the very problems that are likely to crop up for many students.

Turning Critique Sessions into Standards-Based Critique Lessons

A critique session becomes more than a simple exercise in closely examining student work when it leads students to new learning, application of knowledge and skills, and meeting standards. It then becomes a standards-driven critique lesson. As with all student-engaged assessment practices, standards-based learning targets are the foundation of every critique lesson. Critique lessons will not be effective without clear learning targets and models of what meeting the learning target looks like. The sample in-depth critique on the following page flows from a clear learning target, based upon a fourth-grade Common Core math standard. It illustrates how effective critique can be as a lesson. Many concepts and areas of content that the teacher would be addressing in a conventional, lecture-type lesson can be addressed more powerfully and concretely in a mini-lesson connected to a critique of real work. Critique lessons like this actively involve students in analyzing work against learning targets, and compel them to use academic vocabulary and cite evidence for their assertions. These are key skills for meeting Common Core standards.



A well-run critique lesson engages students in meeting standards-based learning targets.

In-Depth Critique Snapshot

Fourth-Grade Math Class

Common Core standard: 4.MD.3: Apply the area and perimeter formulas for rectangles in real world and mathematical problems.

Long-term learning target: I can use formulas to find the area and perimeter of spaces in the real world and in math problems.

Supporting lesson targets: 1.) I can recognize when the formulas for rectangular area and perimeter are used correctly in student work, and can explain why, using evidence from the work. 2.) I can describe what a good solution to a real-world area and perimeter problem looks like, and explain why.

Step One—Choosing the work samples for a clear purpose: The teacher has a collection of student work from prior years of students measuring rectangular spaces in the school, drawing labeled diagrams, and calculating area and perimeter. From this collection, she creates a packet with four work samples—two samples are fully accurate, one is partially accurate, one is fully inaccurate. All the work is anonymous and there are no labels as to which samples are accurate and which are not.

Step Two—Individual challenge (5 minutes): The teacher hands a packet of the four samples to each student. Students silently and individually analyze the samples and try to make sense of them, determining which they think are accurate and why.

Step Three—Group analysis (10 Minutes): The students are clustered into groups of four. Each group discusses which of the samples they feel is accurate, and justifies their opinions with evidence from the work.

Step Four—Whole group critique (20 Minutes) The teacher leads the class in an analysis of the samples. First, she introduces the long term learning target and the supporting learning targets for the lesson. Next, she leads the class in analyzing each of the four student samples. She begins with what they noticed about the samples—without judgment of right and wrong—focusing on what strikes them about the work. She then focuses on accuracy, discussing which ones they feel are correct and why, citing evidence. After this, she leads the group in discussing which samples are good examples—those that are clear and correctly-labeled and include well-explained reasoning.

Step Five—Small Group Brainstorm (5 Minutes): Small groups brainstorm a list of the attributes of a “good” solution—accurate and well-presented.

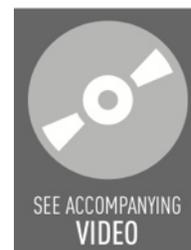
Step Six—Building of Collaborative criteria (10 minutes): The teacher runs a whole class discussion, eliciting comments from each group. She charts their thinking about what a good solution to a real-world rectangular perimeter and area problem looks like.

Define the purpose for each critique lesson

Critique lessons can have a variety of specific purposes—setting standards of quality and developing criteria for work (as in the example above), supporting focused revision, or fine-tuning final presentations, products, or performances. It is important to make the particular focus of the critique clear from the outset. The teacher frames the critique with core academic learning targets so that she can keep track of guiding the inquiry to address them. Clarity about learning targets should not prevent the critique from producing unplanned discoveries, clarifications and new ideas or directions, and it is important for the teacher to celebrate and identify these.

Teacher-facilitated critique lessons that include looking together at work models can be used to address learning in a variety of disciplines. The lesson could focus on:

- *Content* (e.g., simple machines, an historical time line)
- *Concepts* (e.g., recurring themes in history, binary numbers)
- *Skills* (e.g., keyboarding, interpreting a bar chart, factoring equations)
- *Product Formats or Genres* (e.g., business letter, political map, watercolor portrait)
- *Habits of Scholarship* (e.g., group collaboration during field work excursions, participation during literature circles, hallway behavior)



The critique lesson snapshot below is a good example of how clear focus and purpose can lead students to a productive understanding of expectations for quality. A similar lesson can also be viewed on the accompanying video of third graders at Presumpscot School in Portland, ME.

Gallery Critique Snapshot

3rd Grade Classroom at Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.

Ron Berger, from Expeditionary Learning, visited Lori Andrusic's third-grade classroom as a "guest critic" and led a whole-class gallery critique on story openings. The students were working to improve their skills in writing narratives, which corresponds to third-grade Common Core writing standards, W.3.3: "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences." For this critique lesson, Berger narrowed the focus to one small but vital aspect of narratives—the opening lines. He asked Andrusic to cut and paste the first line (or lines, as warranted) of the first-draft story of each student into a single document. This document was in each student's hands at the beginning of the lesson. Notice what Berger does in this lesson to draw out and codify the thinking of students.

With Andrusic prepared to list students' ideas on chart paper, the class read aloud all the opening lines of the stories. Berger then asked the students if there was one that really stood out and grabbed their interest.

A boy's hand shot up: "This one—written by Hector" he said. "I love this one: *'The haunted car. It all started when..'*"

"What is it about that opening line you like so much?" Berger asked.

"I don't know... I just do."

"Is it a particular word? The flow of the language? An idea?"

He smiled. "It *is* a word—*haunted*. I love that word."

"Why do you think you love that word?"

"I don't know. It's powerful?"

Andrusic turned to her chart paper with the title Strategies for Good Story Openings at the top and wrote the first of the class's discoveries: Powerful Words.

"Does anybody else see an opening with a powerful word?" Berger continues.

“I do” said a girl. “Once there were some ninjas in China, they were magic ninjas.”

“And what’s the powerful word there?”

“*Magic*. If they were just *plain* ninjas... Boring (The class nodded their agreement). It’s *magic* that makes you interested.”

One boy raised his hand with concern: “I don’t think I used any powerful words in my opening,” he said. “I don’t think my story has anything interesting until half-way down the first page. I’m gonna do some rewriting.” Another girl raised her hand. “I think it’s not just that haunted is a good word... it’s also putting together haunted with car—that’s unexpected. Haunted house, that’s usual, but *haunted car*—that’s weird, and interesting.”

The class had additions for the list: Combining Words in Unusual Ways; Using the Unexpected

The class was suddenly full of ideas, hands shooting up around the circle. The list grew longer. And then a quiet boy raised his hand tentatively. “Can we go back to Hector’s—the haunted car?” he asked. “I think it’s more than just the word haunted. I think that story opening has *music*.”

“What do you mean, music?” Berger asked. “Can you describe it?”

He sang the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony with dramatic flourish: “Da-da-da- DUM!” The class erupted in delight and repeated his notes.

“Tell us more. Where do you see that?”

“*It all started when...* da-da-da-DUM! I can tell it’s a mystery! It has that mystery opening. Like a fairy tale opens with “Once upon a time’ but a mystery opens like this.”

This really got the class thinking. Are there standard openings for genres of stories? Did they want to use them? The discussion took off and they were engaged in generating strategies for good story openings for half an hour. Eventually Berger had to say a regretful goodbye to lead critique lessons in other classes, but when he ran into these same students at lunch they gathered around quickly to resume the dialogue. “Hector isn’t at lunch,” they told Berger. “He’s back in the room working on his story. He doesn’t usually write so much but now he just can’t stop!”

Determine the right timing in a sequence of curriculum for a critique to be held

Depending on the goals and learning targets, critique can be useful at a variety of times in a curriculum or long-term study:

- *Introductory teacher-facilitated lesson using previously collected models of work*—to set a high standard for quality and to construct with students a framework of criteria for what constitutes good work in that domain or product format.
- *In process, during the creation of work*—to support focused revision, clarify and tune student efforts to apply criteria for quality, refocus



Teachers must determine when critique lessons will have the most benefit for students.

student concentration and momentum, and introduce new concepts or next steps. The snapshot of good story openings on the previous pages is a good example of this.

- *Just before final exhibition of work*—to fine tune the quality of the presentation, display, or performance for an audience. Often final details and touches make a major difference in quality.
- *After completion of an assignment*—to reflect on quality and learning and to set goals.

Depending also on the assignment or project being created, each of these points in the sequence of study suggests a different focus and style of critique lesson. Ideally a form of critique will be used at all points in the process.

Choose a structured format or protocol to match the goals

A discussion protocol—a planned format or agenda—can help create a more productive conversation. Protocols help structure group discussions by:

- Defining a sequence of discussion prompts
- Structuring time, allocating a set amount of minutes for each section of a discussion
- Defining roles, assigning particular perspectives or responsibilities to various group members
- Defining norms for the give and take of ideas and for listening habits



The right protocol will help students stay focused and productive.

There are well-known protocols for critique, such as the Collaborative Assessment Protocol¹ or The Tuning Protocol² on the following page. There is, however, no single protocol that works well in all classroom settings. Critique protocols work best when they are designed or customized by classroom teachers to meet the particular needs of their lesson objectives and classroom settings. All protocols, whether established or invented, benefit from being tweaked and refashioned at times to suit particular situations.

¹ Developed by Steve Seidel and Project Zero Colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

² Adapted from National School Reform Faculty

Strategy Close Up

The Tuning Protocol

Purpose: To identify strengths and weaknesses of an anonymous work model

Time: Approximately 30 min.

Grade Level: Fifth and higher

Roles: Presenter/teacher, participants (ideally in small groups)

Steps:

1. **Presentation** by presenter/teacher; participants are silent (4 minutes)
 - Provide context for the work being discussed
 - Present a question to the group that will help them focus their feedback on one aspect
2. **Reading/examination** (3-8 minutes)
Students examine the work, focusing on the question the presenter/teacher asked
3. **Clarifying questions** (3 minutes)
Note: Clarifying questions are matter of fact; save substantive issues for later. Clarifying questions are answerable with “yes,” “no,” or a single brief sentence. The teacher/presenter is responsible for making sure that clarifying questions are “clarifying” in nature.
4. **Processing by participants** (10-15 minutes)
Participants talk to each other about the teacher/presenter’s work, with particular attention to the focusing question, while the teacher/presenter remains quiet, taking notes as appropriate. The group begins dialogue by concentrating on:
 - Strengths
 - Disconnects and problems
 - Questions for probing or further reflection on the part of the presenter
5. **Teacher/presenter’s response** (5 minutes)
Presenter shares out significant points, recognizes powerful feedback, and identifies next steps.

Two Types of Critique Lessons

Gallery critique

In a gallery critique, all students post work for everyone to view closely. A gallery critique works best when the goal is to identify and capture positive features in the selected works that can help everyone improve. If the work is visual, it can be posted for viewing in a gallery style. If the work is written, it may be posted on a wall or copied and distributed. For written work, short pieces or a portion of a larger piece (e.g., a multi-step word problem, the lead of a paper, a poem) work best. The critique of first lines of stories featured on pages 12 and 13 is an example of this.

There are clearly advantages to sharing every student’s work, such as building accountability, excitement, shared commitment, and a realistic sense of how one’s work compares with others.

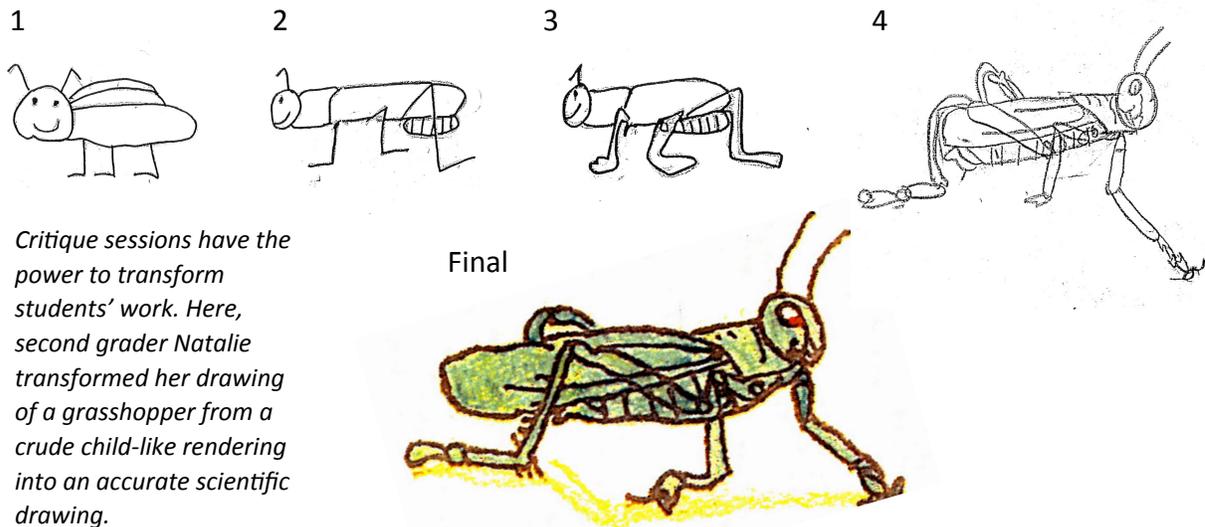
However, it is important to create safety for students whose initial performance on the assignment was weak. A protocol for a gallery critique might look something like this:

- **Introduction:** The teacher explains the steps of the protocol and the learning targets. He reminds students of the norms of giving feedback—**Be Kind, Be Specific, and Be Helpful.**
- **Step One—Posting the work (5 minutes):** Each student tapes his or her first draft to the wall.
- **Step Two—Silent gallery walk (5 minutes):** Students view all the drafts in a silent walk, and take notes identifying strong examples of a pre-determined focus (e.g., descriptive language, use of evidence, elegant problem solving, experiment design).
- **Step Three—What did you notice? (5 minutes):** The teacher leads a discussion in which students are not allowed to make judgments or give opinions—they can comment only on things they noticed and identified.
- **Step Four—What is working? (15 minutes):** The teacher leads the class in a discussion of which aspects of the posted drafts grabbed their attention or impressed them. Each time a student chooses an example, he or she needs to articulate exactly what they found compelling, citing evidence from the work itself. If they're not sure, the teacher draws them out until they can point to evidence in the work and name something specific. The teacher also points to examples he is impressed with, and explains why. The insights are charted by the teacher to codify specific strategies that they can use to improve their drafts.



A silent gallery walk allows students to focus on how work does or does not meet learning targets and standards for quality.

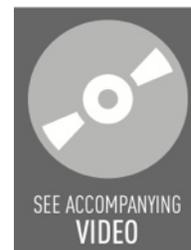
Figure 1: Natalie's Grasshopper—Multiple Drafts



Critique sessions have the power to transform students' work. Here, second grader Natalie transformed her drawing of a grasshopper from a crude child-like rendering into an accurate scientific drawing.

In-depth critique: A single piece of work (or set of related pieces) is used to highlight strengths, or to highlight common areas in need of revision or gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed (e.g., use of evidence, descriptive language, topic development). Unlike a gallery critique, where the focus is exclusively on positive aspects in the collection of work, an in-depth critique analyzes a particular piece to determine what aspects are working and what are not. The goal is to recognize and name particular features that are effective or ineffective, so that the class can learn from them. Below is an example of an in-depth critique from a high school physics class.

Also see the accompanying video of 'The Story of Austin's Butterfly. In its original form (detailed on page 32), Austin's experience was more of a peer feedback session than an in-depth critique, however, the artifacts from Austin's work can be shared with other students, taking on the form of an in-depth critique.



In-Depth Critique Snapshot High School Physics

Ron Berger, from Expeditionary Learning, visits schools across the country and often serves as a “guest critiquer.” In the snapshot on pages 12 and 13, Berger helped a third-grade class generate criteria for strong opening lines for their stories. Here, he helps a high school physics teacher who is struggling to help her students write good lab reports.

“I’m still getting lousy lab reports,” she said. “It’s driving me crazy!”

When Berger asked how she addressed this problem, she responded that she graded every lab report and included extensive written comments on each one. Still, she lamented, they rarely improved very much. Berger asked if she had ever shown her students an example of a good lab report. She replied that she hadn’t. At Berger’s urging, the teacher dug out several lab reports from a student who was one of the exceptions in her class—she wrote excellent lab reports. She chose a particularly good one, and then located the student to see if she would mind if one of her reports was used as a model. The student was delighted.

Berger copied the lab report (with the student’s name erased, to avoid distractions), and then ran critique lessons with a number of different physics classes that day, with students analyzing the model report. Students were amazed at the depth and length of the report, and the precision of language. It made their typical reports look, in their words, “pretty sorry,” and a number of them laughed about their low standards for this work.

One young man turned to the teacher and said: “Is this what you wanted to us to do? Why didn’t you show us this in September?”

Case Study

Critique and Descriptive Feedback at the Center of the Curriculum

Adapted from a piece written by Jane Dunbar, kindergarten teacher at ANSER Charter School in Boise, Idaho during her class's learning expedition on birds. In this learning expedition, extensive fieldwork and research led students to their final product—beautiful, high-quality bird cards (see Figure 2 on page 20 for an example of one of the student's bird cards) which were sold throughout the state to raise money for bird habitats. The use of models and critique lessons were central to Dunbar's curriculum.

By February we are ready to start the month-long project. Each child will research and draw a scientific representation of one bird. While each kindergartner has the support of a fifth- or sixth-grade buddy for research, the drawings are all their own. Their exceptional drawings develop over time through carefully layered instructional practices, and a classroom climate that makes all things seem possible to these young, impassioned learners. By building a classroom community that supports strong character development (courage, compassion, respect, discipline and integrity), children learn to challenge themselves, to give and receive constructive criticism, and to take risks as learners.

Steps to the Final Product

Best Work—Kindergartners know that they must attend to lessons, practice, reflect on their work, and have the courage to take risks as learners and learn from their mistakes. I honor effort and intentions in this classroom each and every day. Kindergartners have been internalizing these behaviors since September.

A Culture of Quality—My role is to provide quality materials (paper, colored drawing pencils of every shade), exemplary photographs to work from, and modeling of how to visualize and then draw lines corresponding to the shape of a given bird.

Rubric—Students look at an exemplary bird drawing done by a former kindergartner. Next to this drawing is the photograph that was used as a model. “What do you notice?” I ask. Children look closely at similarities and differences. I help them tease generic comments into specific, explicit descriptions. After this close examination of work, I ask students what is important to notice when drawing a bird. The children develop criteria for the rubric. I use their words and

add icons for each characteristic.

Collaborative Critique—Children continue to look closely at each other’s work. This time the rubric, the photo, and each draft of a peer’s work is displayed. We focus our attention on the latest draft. I ask the children, “What do you notice?” I try to remind students that they only “notice” and that they do not make evaluative comments. I then ask the group, “What would you do on the next draft if this were yours?” And, “What would you change?” I challenge them for details. For example, “What about the eye?” and “What line/shape/color needs attention?” From this discussion the child whose work is displayed makes his/her own decision on what will be the focus of the next draft and writes an intention on a sticky note (see below). The child has been given many suggestions but he/she has ownership of this next important decision of how to proceed. A collaborative critique of one child’s work can take between 10-20 minutes.

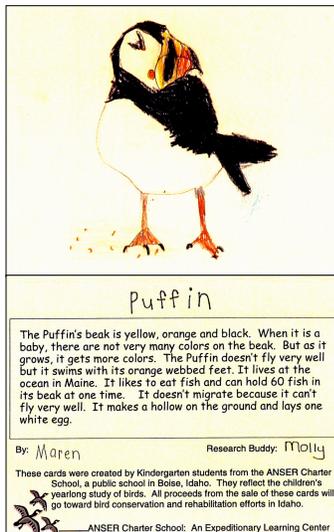
Compliment Circle—A compliment circle follows the critique session. The student who has shown work calls on his/her peers for compliments. With both the critique and compliment circle, I have found it important to be sure each featured student gets the *same* number of constructive comments and compliments. Attention to balance saves any unintentional negative comparison between students and their work.

Sticky Notes—Each child, using the rubric as a guide, sets an intention for the focus of his/her efforts on the next draft. Writing the word or drawing the icon given on the rubric, the kindergartner focuses now on his/her own work and sets an intention. I place the sticky note above a new white piece of drawing paper and alert teachers and other adults present as to what the child is attempting to accomplish with this next draft. Adults can then support the child’s intentions.

Doing More than They Thought Possible

Most children do four to five drafts before marking the rubric and formally assessing their own work. Each draft will take 30 to 40 minutes. At this point in the process, children decide if they have accomplished “best work” or if they wish to try again. A surprising number will want to try again. They are hooked. This process has led them far beyond what they ever thought possible.

Figure 2: Sample Bird Card



Kindergartners in Boise, ID created a beautiful boxed set of bird cards. This extraordinarily high-quality work by very young students was made possible by critique lessons at the heart of the curriculum. The full story is detailed in the case study on the previous two pages.

The Role of the Teacher in a Critique Lesson

The teacher must take an active role in facilitation throughout a critique lesson. This process works best when it looks organic (emerging entirely from student ideas) but is in fact skillfully shaped. The teacher chooses students strategically for comments; governs the flow of discussion and contributes enthusiasm; interjects compelling comments to build interest and makes key points herself; and reframes student observations when necessary to make them clear to the group and connect to the learning targets. The teacher needs to remember that the critique is a lesson, with clear learning targets, and should not hesitate to take charge of the flow to ensure the session is productive.

Be a strong guardian of critique norms

The most important teacher role is to foster and sustain a critique culture that is emotionally safe for students and productive for learning. The critique rules, or norms, must be explicit and tracked vigilantly during the lesson to ensure that all students feel protected from ridicule (even subtle sarcasm or facial expressions) and that comments are specific and instructive. The critique rules should require participants to be kind, specific and helpful in their comments. In addition to guarding against any hurtful comments, this also means guarding against vague comments (e.g., “I like it,” “It’s good”). Participants must point to specific features (e.g., “I think the title is well-chosen,” “Including the graph makes it much clearer to me”). It means that repetitive comments or tangential comments that derail the momentum of learning should be avoided. The participants should be aware of the goals for the critique lesson and their comments should relate to the group effort to build understanding.

To do this well, the teacher must convey that she is in absolute control of the rules and will tolerate nothing that is mean spirited. At the same time, she must also encourage positive, helpful comments. It is also useful to “critique the critique,” that is, for the teacher to continually note and compliment insightful or thoughtful comments, and to lead the class in reflection about what constitutes good critique.



The teacher must ensure that students adhere to group norms.

There are additional guideline suggestions that can help to build a positive climate. Examples of such guidelines are:

- It should always be clear that it is the work itself, not the author of the work, that is the subject of the critique.
- Use “I” statements (e.g., “I don’t understand your first sentence,” rather than “It doesn’t make sense”).
- Begin comments, if possible, with a positive feature in the work before moving on to perceived weaknesses (e.g., “I think the eyes in your portrait are very powerful, but I think adding eyebrows would give it more feeling”).
- Frame ideas where possible as questions rather than as statements (e.g., “Why did you chose to leave out the illustration on this draft?” rather than “It was better with an illustration”).

These norms are especially important when students are sharing their own work with their classmates, but they apply even when the work is from outside of the class. Explicitly teaching and using critique rules will strengthen students’ critique skills as well as their abilities to hear and use descriptive feedback.

Keep the critique moving at an interesting, energetic pace

To keep the critique engaging, the teacher should be sure the work being analyzed is accessible and clear. Photocopies should be made for each student, or posted and projected work should be close enough for students to easily see. This preparation will help the teacher keep the lesson lively, involving a range of voices in the discussion, reading work aloud with strong voice or choosing selected students to read aloud, or calling students up to the board to point out exactly what they see in the posted work.

Distill, shape, and record the insights from the critique

Many of the insights that the teacher hopes students will come to may arise from student comments, but may need the teacher to jump on them, repeat them, reword, or reframe them. Later they may even be codified for the class in the form of criteria or next steps. It is helpful to return to these insights during the critique, explicitly attributing them to the original student (“Tamika’s theory” or “Jonathan’s observation”), even though the teacher has perhaps changed and deepened the original comment. If particular key insights don’t arise, the teacher shouldn’t hesitate to seed them as

questions or discovery challenges in viewing the work (“Did anyone notice...,” “Can you see an example of...”) or simply add them directly.

In a gallery critique, the teacher can’t just rely on students picking the examples that are most useful and generative—she must direct attention to examples that are important bridges to the learning targets, and ones that will stimulate new insights. She can use gallery critiques for other purposes as well—to give public affirmation to students who have made particular progress, or conversely, to use the critique to push students who have exhibited less than best effort. If there is a guest critique expert from the professional community, the teacher can seed the critique by explaining to the expert the learning targets and goals for the session, and perhaps help to direct his or her attention beforehand to particular pieces of work. (For more on using guest critique experts, see the snapshot of this practice on page 25).

Focus on naming the specific qualities and strategies that students can take away with them

It is not useful for students to leave the session with the idea that “Aliya is a good writer” or “The book review we read was great,” but rather, “Aliya used eight strategies that made her piece good, and now I know them and can use them.” Naming the effective qualities and strategies must be explicit, openly discussed and negotiated, and must result in terms that students understand—in their language. Sometimes it is not even clear to the teacher at first what feature in the work is being cited as strong—this is a perfect opportunity to engage the class in a spirited discussion to define and name the feature. The more concrete the naming of features, the better. Charting the names of features and hanging them on the wall for reference helps. Vague insights put on a chart, such as “Use ‘voice’” are less helpful, particularly to weaker writers, than specific suggestions such as “Include dialogue;” “Use verbs other than ‘said;’” “Use punctuation marks other than periods.” Again, the teacher should not hesitate to reshape student ideas into words that she feels will be clear and helpful, and to add to the list if students have omitted important qualities or strategies.

The process of naming qualities and strategies can also be a step in creating a rubric of what constitutes quality for this genre or skill, or can refer to an existing rubric that the class uses, supporting that rubric with specific strategies. The critique lesson is most effective in creating specific, rather than general, criteria lists or rubrics—instead of *What Makes Good Writing*, the list would address *Features of a Good Research Paper*. On the following page is an excerpt from a sample rubric for a letter-writing assignment with specific, detailed criteria for proficiency on one learning target. Additional learning targets for this assignment (not shown) focus on domain-specific vocabulary, organization, and writing conventions.

“Rubrics help you understand what quality work is. They tell you the truth. You may have thought you did very good, but then you get your score and you see what you need to work on.”

*Alex, Third- Grade Student,
Grass Valley Charter School,
Grass Valley, CA*

Table 1: Sample Rubric

Writing Invitation:

You are an individual who wants to impact what kids eat in school. Write a letter to the superintendent to persuade her to change school food policy.

Long-Term Learning Target:

I can write an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and sufficient evidence.

Learning Target	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
<i>I can develop a clear position/claim about food policy and support it with valid reasoning and sufficient evidence (derived from Common Core writing anchor standard 1, grades 9-10)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic is only loosely about school food policy or is muddled. • No counterclaims are presented • Evidence only loosely supports the position or claim/counterclaim and there is minimal evidence or no evidence cited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic addresses school food policy but lacks a clear position statement. • Claims and counterclaims are present but lack coherence and do not build on the position/claim. • Evidence only loosely supports the position or claim/counterclaim or there is minimal evidence present. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author develops a clear position on school food policy. • Author demonstrates an ability to anticipate audience's knowledge and concerns through the development of the claims and counterclaims. • Author includes well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient evidence from text to support the position/claim and counterclaims. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position is clear and provides a unique perspective. • Multiple related claims/counterclaims flow seamlessly together. • Extensive and varied evidence (e.g., quotes, data) from a variety of sources back the position and each claim/counterclaim

Teach the vocabulary

The Common Core standards require students to “acquire new vocabulary, particularly general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.” In line with the Common Core, this kind of vocabulary acquisition is the foundation of effective critique. Imagine a fifth-grade writing lesson with the following learning target: “I can use teacher feedback to make decisions about how to revise my script,” derived from Common Core standard W.5.5: “With support from peers and adults, I can use a writing process to produce clear and coherent writing.” In order to meet this learning target, students must understand the academic vocabulary words *feedback* and *revise*. The teacher may support students in deconstructing a word like “revise”—identifying the prefix *re-* and explaining its meaning as *again* and the root *vise* as derived from the word *vision*, which means to see. Additionally, students must use domain-specific vocabulary like script, narrator, character, lines, conflict, and theme, to give effective feedback. To use a metaphor, if critique is like surgery, carefully cutting into a piece of work to determine what is working well and what is not, then the surgical tools are the words we use to dissect the piece. If a student can only use simple terms to describe a piece (e.g., “It’s good. I like it”), it’s like attempting surgery with a butter knife. Students need sharp precision in their language (e.g., “I think the narrator’s voice sounds too much like a kid our age and not like someone his character’s age,” “There is a confusion here between correlation and causation”) to be effective surgeons. The beauty of this is that it gives students authentic reason and immediate application for learning new vocabulary and putting it to use.

Providing Descriptive Feedback to Individual Students

There is a great deal of overlap between whole-class critique lessons and individual descriptive feedback, in the mindset, skills, and practices that teachers must bring to this work. As the snapshot from the physics classroom on page 17 illustrates, showing students an excellent model can in fact be a powerful form of feedback (i.e., “Why didn’t you show us this in September?”). Teachers give students feedback all the time. In this section, we propose that teachers think more analytically and strategically about the nature of the feedback they provide.

Descriptive feedback is distinguished by these features:

- The focus is on supporting the growth of an individual student or small group, improving a particular piece of work, performance, skill, or disposition.
- It is typically an exchange between teacher and student, or student and student, not a public learning experience for the class.
- It is nested in a long-term relationship (e.g., teacher/student, coach/player, supervisor/worker). Maintaining a constructive relationship must be an implicit focus in all feedback conversations, whether spoken or written.



Feedback is typically a private exchange between teacher and student.

- Individuals are sensitive when receiving personal feedback. It is much more likely that strategic positive comments will result in improvements than will criticism.
- Feedback ideally flows from a strong knowledge of the student—knowing the student’s strengths and weaknesses, knowing where she is in her growth and what she needs to spark the next step of growth.

In some cases, feedback will come from a guest expert or someone a student doesn’t know well. For example, a martial arts class might be visited by a highly honored Sensei. This teacher knows nothing about the students, but can watch a class and offer highly specific feedback to each student. Because of his expertise and fresh eyes, this expert is able to offer advice that may be new and constructive. It builds excitement when students know they will receive feedback from an authentic expert, impels them to work harder, and models for them the concepts and vocabulary of the field. It is important to structure these sessions carefully and prepare the guest experts for a successful experience for the expert and for students.

Strategy Close Up

“Speed Feedback”

In Expeditionary Learning schools, students frequently produce work modeled after a “real-world” format. For example, rather than a typical book report, students might instead write book reviews and maintain a blog for other students their age. In such cases, bringing a professional into the classroom to offer feedback can add huge value for the students who are motivated to make their work mirror that of professionals in the field.

In one sixth-grade classroom where students were working on architectural blueprints of residential homes for fictional clients, a different local architect visited the classroom for 90 minutes on three consecutive Fridays. Each architect began with a 15-minute presentation to the class, followed by a work period during which he or she circulated the room offering feedback to students.

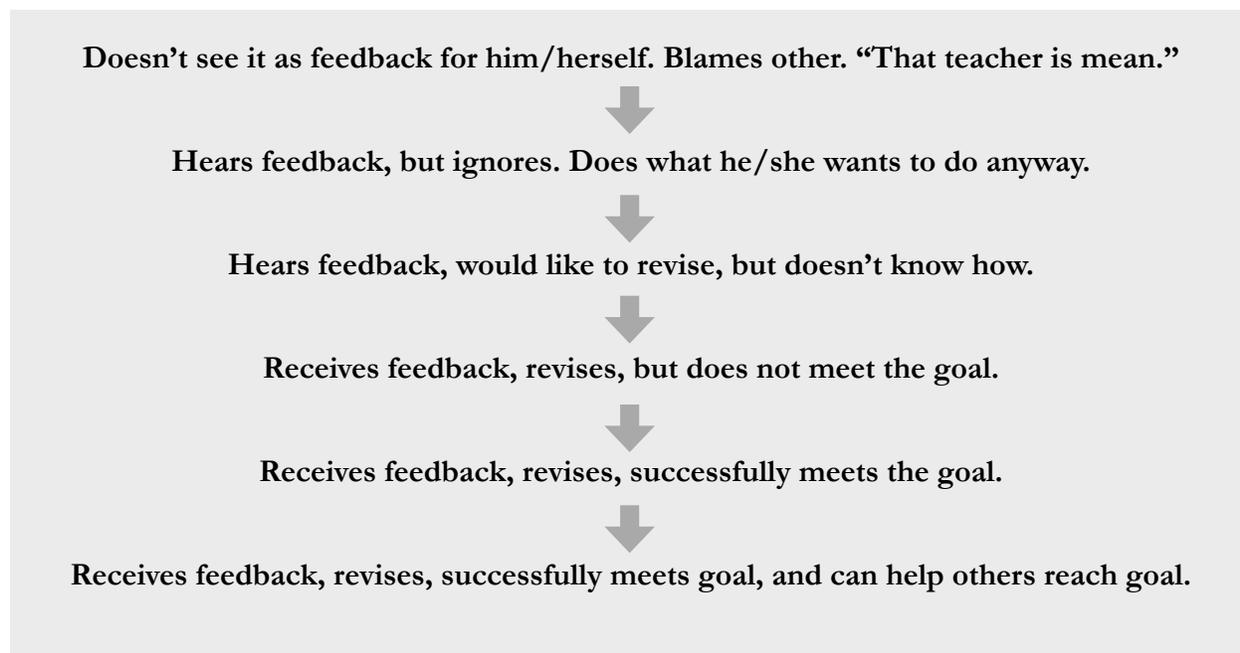
To ensure that all 24 students had the chance to meet with the architect, the class used a “speed feedback” protocol, based on speed chess. The architect met with each student for three minutes, looking over the plans and pointing out positive or problematic features. To monitor time, a student ambassador stood behind the architect with a stopwatch and gave a signal when time was up. Using this protocol, every student received feedback from three different architects, which allowed them to produce high-quality work that mirrored the work of real architects as closely as possible.

Planning for Effective Feedback

Analyze and adapt your current means of giving feedback

Every teacher spends much of the day giving students feedback—collectively and individually. The question is, how much of this feedback is actually used by students to improve their learning. Figure 3 below is a continuum of how a student might hear and use feedback.

Figure 3: Continuum of How Students Hear Feedback



Often the students most readily able to meet the final two points on the continuum are already the most capable, skilled, and successful. "Students can't hear something that's beyond their comprehension; nor can they hear something if they are not listening or are feeling like it would be useless to listen. Because students' feelings of control and self-efficacy are involved, even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive ("See? I knew I was stupid!") The research on feedback shows its Jekyll-and-Hyde character. Not all studies about feedback show positive effects. The nature of the feedback and the context in which it is given matter a great deal" (Brookhart, 2008a, p.2).

It helps immensely when descriptive feedback is part of a comprehensive approach to student-engaged assessment—when students are clear about the learning targets and are asked to set goals for their learning, and when they are taught the language and norms of critique and shown positive models of giving and receiving feedback. In essence, when students are treated as partners in assessment from the outset, they will be in a much stronger position to make use of a teacher's feedback.

"Descriptive feedback helps me by letting me know what I need to improve and what I did well on. It makes my final product feel more complete."

—Rachael, Seventh-Grade Student, Vallejo Charter School, Vallejo, CA

The good news is that like every other important instructional practice, feedback can be fine-tuned and improved through careful attention to its content and delivery. As students become more proficient utilizing feedback, they become more independent learners.

Consider the “how”³

Timing: How often and when should feedback be given?

- Always be sure that there will be time and opportunity for the student to use the feedback.
- Immediate feedback is best for factual knowledge (yes/no, right/wrong), but delaying a bit will make sense for more complex assessments of comprehension and thinking processes.
- Provide feedback as often as you can for major assignments. The best feedback is ongoing.

Quantity: How much feedback should be given?

- Choose priority points that relate to the most important learning targets.
- Consider the individual student’s developmental needs and how much he or she can take in at once.

Written vs. Oral: What’s the right balance between these modes?

- Oral feedback, provided as students are working, is often the most effective and efficient.
- If giving oral feedback, it is often useful to ask the student to repeat back what he or she heard, to guard against misinterpretations.
- Use individual conferences for more substantive feedback.
- Provide targeted written feedback on the work itself, or on an assignment sheet or rubric/criteria sheet.

Audience: What is the right balance between group and individual feedback?

- Individual feedback conveys the message that the teacher cares about the individual’s learning. It is also most tailored and responsive to an individual’s needs.
- Group or whole class feedback works if everyone has missed the same thing or a clear pattern of weakness has emerged.

Tone: How words are used matters a great deal in giving effective feedback.

- Effective Tone:
 - Be positive
 - Be constructive when critical
 - Make suggestions not prescriptions or mandates
- Ineffective Tone:
 - Finding fault
 - Describing what is wrong but offering no suggestions
 - Punishing or denigrating students for poor work

³ This section is adapted from *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*, Susan M. Brookhart, 2008, and *Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom*, Connie Moss and Susan Brookhart, 2009

Clarity: Feedback should be understandable and user-friendly. Like learning targets, feedback should be framed in language students can readily understand. Assessment expert and author, Grant Wiggins, tells a useful story: “A student came up to [a teacher] at year’s end and said, ‘Miss Jones, you kept writing this same word on my English papers all year, and I still don’t know what it means.’ ‘What’s the word?’ she asked. ‘Vag-oo’ he said. (The word was *vague!*)” (Wiggins, 2012, p. 11)

Consider the “what”—the content of feedback

Focus: Feedback can be focused on the work or task, on the process of learning, or on the way a student self-regulates and uses his or her thought processes to accomplish a task. It should not be focused on the student personally and personal comments should be avoided. Feedback should always be connected to the goals for learning and be “actionable,” offering specific ideas for what to do next and how to improve.

Comparison: Effective feedback compares student work or performance with criteria and with past performance, benchmarks, and personal goals. “Norm-referenced feedback,” which compares a student’s performance with that of other students is generally not useful. It doesn’t help a student improve and often damages the motivation of unsuccessful students.

Function: The function or purpose of feedback is to *describe* how the student has done in order to identify ways/provide information about how to improve. *Evaluating* or *judging* performance does not help students improve. (For example, grading work in a draft stage tends to shut down motivation to revise ...as does stating that the work is simply “good” or “bad.”)

“If only using ‘descriptive’ vs. ‘evaluative’ feedback were simply a matter of wordsmithing! We could all learn how to write descriptive feedback just as we learned to write descriptive paragraphs in elementary school. Unfortunately, part of the issue is how the student understands the comment. Students filter what they hear through their own past experiences, good and bad” (Brookhart, 2008a, p.24). This brings us back to the importance of fostering strong collaborative cultures, building relationships with students, and setting the work in the context of student-engaged assessment more broadly. There are many strategies and techniques, but unfortunately no short-cuts.

In Practice

Developing Structures to Make Feedback and Critique a Part of Daily Lessons

At the classroom level, respectful and helpful critique and descriptive feedback can be incorporated every day into all aspects of schooling, improving the quality of student understanding, work, effort, and character. Students learn to self-critique and critique others, respectfully and helpfully, as part of a productive learning environment. As the practices are implemented more consistently across classrooms in a school and understood and used more effectively by teachers, they are tightly aligned to standards and more closely integrated as part of a student-engaged assessment system.

Identify teacher-to-student feedback strategies for daily lessons and long-term assignments

- Structure individual conference times (can be as brief as several minutes) during work time. Focus on brief, clear, specific comments, and on interactions with students as they work.
- Utilize small group mini-lessons to address common areas of weakness.
- Target one skill at a time. Focus comments on one to two important areas (don't copyedit!). Connect feedback to learning targets, using rubrics to highlight areas for improvement.
- Assess effectiveness of feedback—examine student work and performance to see if feedback was utilized. Are students moving toward meeting learning targets and standards?

Identify peer and self-assessment strategies

- Teach students the purpose and language of feedback.
- Return frequently to learning targets and ensure that students understand them.
- Model giving effective feedback for students. Ask students to self-assess using similar language.
- Emphasize self-assessment over peer assessment—research has demonstrated it is more effective in improving learning (Brookhart, 2008a).

As the case study of Susan McCray's 11th grade English class on the following page illustrates, the use of learning targets, goal setting, descriptive feedback, group critique, and mini-lessons on needs highlighted in the feedback fit together to support all students in meeting the standards.

Case Study

Descriptive Feedback in a High School English Class

As students enter Susan McCray's 11th grade English classroom at Casco Bay High School in Portland, ME, they are handed back the first drafts of their oral histories. They quietly digest the descriptive feedback from McCray while they wait for class to begin. McCray starts them off by reminding them of the long-term learning target for the assignment, "I can write a quality oral history," and the supporting learning target for the day, "I can use my feedback effectively to identify changes to make in revising my oral history."

The rubric for this assignment further describes the learning targets and helps McCray provide highly focused and descriptive feedback to each student. Along with their drafts, she has given them a copy of the rubric, on which she has highlighted particular areas that each student needs to address and filled in with concise written comments. One student explained, "We were handed back our first drafts with feedback. Right now we're looking at what changes we need to make it the best possible piece."

Students then write "entrance tickets" to review the learning targets and to set specific work goals for the class period. Next, McCray asks two students to read their drafts and has students listen for evidence of quality oral histories. One student observes, "She really went after description of every move they made." This condensed version of a group critique lesson primed the pump for students to make use of their own individual feedback.

Her reading of the first drafts allowed McCray to identify two common needs among the students—descriptive detail; and organization. She forms small mini-lesson groups on those topics and students choose whether to continue working on their own drafts individually or to participate in one of the groups.

Following the mini-lessons in small groups, McCray circulates and offers students individual feedback, "Now because they've had the mini-lessons, those are much shorter conversations." As McCray explains, "I've been working to come up with structures that allow me to get to more kids and help everyone to meet the standards."

Preparing Students to be Effective at Giving Peer-to-Peer Feedback

One of the most common structures for feedback and critique in classrooms is the use of student-to-student peer feedback conversations. Many teachers will ask their students to “find your writing critique partner and give them advice on their first draft,” or something similar. In most cases, this practice is largely unproductive. Strategic, effective, specific feedback is a difficult enough practice for adults. For most students, it is impossible without guidance. If we listen in to those peer-to-peer conversations in many classrooms, we will find:

- Students who can only give vague comments
- A confusing mix of copy-editing (suggestions for spelling, grammar and punctuation) with content or language suggestions. (Note: helping students distinguish between these two types of feedback supports them in better understanding Common Core language standards—conventions and grammar—and Common Core writing standards—about student thinking.)
- Students who finish their comments quickly and then engage in off-task discussions

“One of the greatest challenges is to get students to want feedback. I’ll ask students, ‘How did your peer help you?’ And if a student’s reply is, ‘They said it was good enough.’ I say, ‘Then go get them to help you! You don’t want to be ‘good enough.’ You want to be great! Go to them and say you really want their help and their ideas. Don’t let your peer ‘critiquer’ get away with not helping you.’”

Tracy Horner, Teacher, Vallejo Charter School, Vallejo, CA



Students can provide effective peer feedback when concepts and skills are clear and they know what to look for.

Peer-to-peer feedback can be effective when the conditions are right, when students are practiced in giving targeted feedback, and they have clarity on the specific dimension of the work they are analyzing. For example, in a science class where students have been collecting data and creating spreadsheets to categorize those data, the teacher discovers problems with how students have constructed their spreadsheets. Using models, she runs a class critique lesson in which the students analyze models of strong and weak work, and identify in the weaker work the problems she has noticed. If she then asks students to work with a partner to analyze each other’s current spreadsheets to see if any of those problems are present, the class is likely to be very effective in giving helpful feedback to each other. The snapshot of Austin’s Butterfly on the following page is a good example of students having the skills focus, as well as the appropriate vocabulary, to provide their classmate with feedback that supported him to do exemplary work.

Once students have learned the process of giving specific feedback effectively in these formal protocols, there is a positive phenomenon that can develop in which students begin giving each other informal critique, appropriately and respectfully throughout the day.

Snapshot

Austin's Butterfly: Peer Feedback in Small Groups

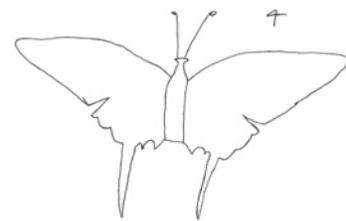
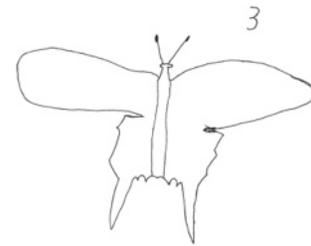
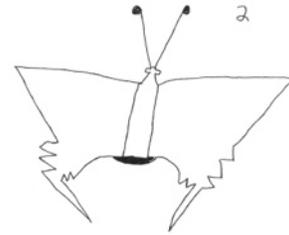
At ANSER Charter School in Boise, Idaho, first grade student Austin was preparing a scientific illustration of a Western Tiger Swallowtail, a local butterfly. The class had looked together at models of butterfly illustrations, and had created criteria and a rubric for a strong illustration. In fact, they created two rubrics: one for the shape of the wings, and one for the pattern inside the wings. Students were charged with using the eyes of scientists to examine a photograph and make sure its features and details were accurately presented in their illustration.

The problem was that Austin was just a first grader, and when he began, he didn't look that carefully at the photograph; he defaulted to the icon of a butterfly shape that was in his head, and his first draft was generic first-grade butterfly outline that looked nothing like a Tiger Swallowtail. Austin met with a small group on the carpet in front of the white board, and, using the criteria for wing shape, his peers gave him kind, specific, helpful suggestions of what he could change to make his drawing look more like the photograph. (For example, they suggested that the wing shape in the photo was triangular, whereas his drawing had rounded wings).

Austin was happy to take their advice, and quickly created a second draft that had more angular wings, and included the "swallowtails" at the base of the wings, as his peers suggested. The growth in his second draft was appreciated by his peers, and they suggested he include both an upper and lower wing on each side, which he then did in his third draft. His peers again appreciated his growth, but pointed out that he had "gotten round again" on the upper wings, and so on his fourth draft he made the upper wings more angular. His peers were delighted that the shape looked right now, and suggested that he add the pattern, which he did for draft five. His sixth and final draft was a beautiful and accurate colored illustration, and showed remarkable growth from his first draft, thanks to the help of excellent peer feedback.

View the accompanying video of Austin's butterfly drafts being used in a Gallery Critique in Portland, ME.

Austin 9-3-02



Critique and Descriptive Feedback as Tools for Increasing Student Achievement and Engagement

Critique and descriptive feedback cannot be effective practices unless students fully own them. In fact, both practices involve a dynamic partnership between teachers and students as they critically analyze work, give, receive, and utilize feedback. It takes strong models, time, and practice before critique and descriptive feedback truly take root in a classroom. The following table illustrates the who, what, and why of implementing an effective practice of critique and descriptive feedback.

Table 2: Increasing Engagement and Achievement		
What do teachers do?	What do students do?	What's the result?
Create quality learning targets and assessments—based on state and Common Core standards—and understand what work that meets standards looks like.	Understand that each lesson and learning activity is connected to learning targets and standards.	Students have greater engagement and ownership of learning. They understand the purpose of their work.
Establish strong norms for giving and receiving feedback and critique: Be Kind, Be Helpful, and Be Specific. Follow-up and be vigilant about using the norms.	Students practice the norms when they participate in critique or give feedback to peers.	Students experience a safe culture that deepens each time they repeat the feedback and critique process.
Build lessons that include frequent opportunities for descriptive feedback and critique.	Participate in giving and receiving feedback and using the information to improve their work and learning.	Student work improves. The quality of feedback and critique lessons grows stronger over time.
Check for whole class understanding. Ensure that all students are included.	Self-assess where they are in relation to a specific learning target using a variety of checking for understanding strategies.	Teachers and students can make informed decisions about next moves (e.g., offering/attending an additional guided practice session, or setting goals for critique.)
Check for individual understanding and use data to make decisions about next instructional steps	Participate in class and turn in work (e.g., exit tickets, reflection journals, drafts, quizzes) that demonstrates where they are in relation to one or more learning targets.	Teachers and students can make informed decisions about next instructional steps related to individual students (e.g., oral or written feedback, differentiated materials and/or goals for next lesson.)

Table 2: Increasing Engagement and Achievement

What do teachers do?	What do students do?	What's the result?
Link feedback and critique to data gathered from checking for understanding.	Engage in listening to feedback and applying it to work.	Student work and learning improves as feedback and critique are targeted to specific learning needs identified through checking for understanding.
Over time, build a repertoire to include a variety of structures and protocols for feedback and critique. Engage students in self-assessment and peer-to-peer feedback.	Students become more proficient at giving, receiving, and using feedback. They are able to take ownership of the process.	An effective culture of descriptive feedback and critique is established in the classroom. This leads to higher levels of achievement and student ownership of learning.

School-Wide Implementation

School leaders: Supporting Staff to Use Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback

A strong and consistent school-wide practice of feedback and critique is an essential component of a student-engaged assessment system. School leaders establish the vision and rationale for the practice through modeling and focused professional development. The culture of positive, constructive critique must permeate the building, modeled by adults and students.

All of the norms, purposes, and processes of good feedback and critique can be practiced by the adults in the community—in team meetings, faculty sessions, and one-on-one interactions. When a principal herself is open to critique and feedback, and models this by allowing faculty at times to revise her plans or decisions, it sends a powerful message of continuous improvement to the faculty.

Not only does this build the dispositions and skills of a critique culture among faculty, but it can't help but permeate the building in ways that students notice, reinforcing their commitment to quality. For example, in many schools, teachers use a protocol to present a proposed unit study (or project or lesson) to peers on the faculty, receiving feedback and perhaps suggested resources. This might even be followed by a protocol for peer observation or lesson study, with teachers observing each other's instruction. When students learn that there are faculty members in the back of the room because their teacher is striving to get better at what she does, this reinforces their own growth mindset.



School leaders should model good practice by inviting critique and feedback from faculty.

Some teachers take the risk of using protocols in which students give them feedback on their lessons. Students fill out response cards or engage in discussion centered on what worked in the lesson for them and what did not. It is surprisingly easy for a strong teacher to use such a protocol with no damage at all to her authority or respect with students, and in fact, it typically enhances the respect she receives from students.

School leaders can also encourage and support the practice of having teachers collect and archive models of strong student work. This starts by ensuring that teachers have deep knowledge of state and Common Core standards and strong accompanying learning targets (for a full set of math and ELA Common Core-aligned learning targets, see Appendix A). It is important that models are aligned to these learning targets and supported by criteria lists and rubrics. The collection of models should grow and change over time. When it is an expectation in a building that the geometry teachers will have a file drawer of high-quality, student-written proofs, and a history teacher will have a similar file of strong student-written essays, then both students and teachers in the school will come to expect to see and discuss models of quality to improve their understanding and work.

Key leadership actions

- Provide time for staff to know their standards deeply, including the instructional shifts required by the Common Core. Support them in developing strong accompanying learning targets (see Appendix A).
- Conduct professional development and establish norms and strategies of feedback and critique that the staff agrees to practice.
- Model critique and feedback in faculty meetings and professional learning settings. It is powerful for faculty to see a leader who publicly appreciates and uses critique of her decisions to improve.
- Establish structures that promote feedback, critique, revision, and sharing of work (e.g., galleries of student work, portfolios that show the evolution of a project over time in response to feedback).
- Establish a regular and consistent practice of collaboratively looking at student work against learning targets to ensure that feedback and critique are effectively improving student performance.
- Embed descriptive feedback and critique into a coherent plan for student-engaged assessment.
- Support the creation of grade-level libraries of student work, as well as benchmarked exemplars to be used as models for teachers and students.
- Document critique lessons through video and other means to help foster the ongoing use and refinement of practice.

"Since the 1990's all California students in 4th and 7th grades take a state writing assessment. As part of the preparation for this summative exam, students examine available sample writing against the 4-point rubric. Both the samples and the rubric are available from the California Department of education website. As a result of this consistent instructional practice, students' writing skills have improved. More importantly though, students are better prepared to look critically for evidence of excellence in their own writing compared to a rubric. They can name their own strengths and hone in on specific needs in their own writing."

Brian Martinez, Principal, Grass Valley Charter School, Grass Valley, CA

Common Challenges

Not spending enough time on culture-building and norms-setting

Time is a critical investment. The pressure to get to the heart of content and skills standards in feedback and critique can lead teachers to shortchange valuable culture building and norms setting activities. This is a serious mistake as the time spent on creating a culture of safety and skills of critique will make the sessions much more effective and will also serve students well as lifelong strategies for success in the workplace.

Lack of clarity about goals, learning targets, and what work that meets standards look like

Know where you are headed. The learning targets and models that bring standards to life give critique and descriptive feedback power and focus. Once students understand and can reflect on where they are headed, they are prepared to receive and use feedback. Being clear about what success looks like, and the steps necessary to get there, will help more students meet standards.

Choosing the wrong work to critique

Good critique depends on compelling work models. If work is chosen haphazardly or for the wrong reasons, the critique lesson will flounder. At the most basic level, interesting and engaging critique lessons require interesting work. Even if it is flawed or full of mistakes, it should be flawed in an interesting way—a way that can lead to learning for all students.

Neglecting the teacher role (thinking that critiques will “run themselves”)

The teacher remains a teacher. It is not enough to choose a good protocol and a compelling piece of work for the critique. The teacher must constantly pay attention to the pace and flow of discussion and the range of participation and focus on capturing and shaping the insights from the discussion. Pushing for clarity and substance, being vigilant about the norms, adding insights, and naming and charting take-aways are all vital roles for the teacher.

Neglecting the student role

Student ownership is key. If the process drags or is too focused on a small number of needs, or if the teacher dominates the discussion, student engagement in critique won't be sustained. Teachers need to ensure that the critique lesson has an energetic pace, that every student understands his or her role and participates, and that the learning targets are clear.

Underestimating student sensitivities to hearing feedback

Feelings matter. Students bring a wide range of experiences—both positive and negative—and different personalities and mindsets to the classroom. Some are more confident and receptive to feedback while others may be anxious or sensitive. It is important to take time to get to know individual students and the range of emotions they bring to the learning process. The selection of approaches to feedback and critique should be shaped by individual needs. Specific, strategic, positive feedback is almost always more effective than criticism.

Underestimating the power of language and timing

Strive for balance in feedback. There are many potential pitfalls in teacher-to-student feedback. It can be too much, too little, too late, too judgmental, or too hard to understand. Take time in solo planning and team discussions to consider what feedback is effective, what is not, and how you can tell the difference.

Asking students to engage in peer feedback when they are unprepared to succeed

Students need tools. Giving strategic, effective feedback is difficult for adults. For unprepared students, it is almost impossible. Peer feedback is often vague and unproductive for both students. Useful peer feedback occurs when students are clear on specific skills and can apply that clarity to a specific focus for the feedback (e.g., after a lesson on accurate labels for the axes of graphs and charts, students analyze each other's graphs to make sure they are done correctly).

What to Expect

It takes time to firmly establish the culture and practices of effective descriptive feedback and critique. As with all of the student-engagement practices, establishing clear learning targets that are linked to Common Core and state standards is a necessary foundation.

Beginning

The beginning phase is characterized by building a strong vision and culture for critique and descriptive feedback. School leaders and teachers begin to use the practices themselves and introduce them to their students. They begin to collect strong models of student work and use them in faculty and classroom critique lessons.

Indicators:

- Teachers set personal as well as team goals for instituting a regular critique practice in their classrooms and share results.
- There is a school-wide focus on setting the norms and building a culture to support critique and descriptive feedback.
- Leaders model critique and descriptive feedback in their meetings and sessions with teachers.
- Teachers use learning targets to guide their critique lessons and descriptive feedback.
- Students begin to exhibit confidence in participating in critique and using feedback.

Intermediate

During the intermediate phase (which could be several years), the practices are in place and working well in many classrooms across the school. More attention is paid to the quality of student engagement in the practices as well as to the quality of student work. The use of models is well established and the school has begun to create a system for collecting, storing, and sharing exemplars.

Indicators:

- The use of critique and descriptive feedback is a consistent and pervasive part of almost every classroom.
- Students take more ownership of the process and understand the link between learning targets, checking for understanding, and critique and descriptive feedback. Motivation and engagement usually increase.
- Faculty members are more comfortable and proficient in using critique and descriptive feedback in their professional interactions.
- The collection and use of models is more extensive across the school.

Advanced

In the advanced phase, a faculty's commitment to continuous improvement through collaborative critique and descriptive feedback allows it to link effectively with every aspect of the student-engaged assessment system. There is a strong collective understanding of state and Common Core standards which is reflected in clear learning targets. Students fully own the critique and descriptive feedback process and understand their progress toward standards.

Indicators:

- Student work models and exemplars are documented and shared extensively.
- Students exhibit pride and ownership of their work and learning. Quality student work and quality student and teacher interactions and discussions are visible throughout the school.
- There is a strong culture of continuous improvement with every member of the community asking "how are we doing?" "what's the evidence?" and "how can we improve?"

Resources and References

Video

All videos accompanying this booklet can be found in EL Commons at vimeo.com/channels/corepractices

Appendices

All appendices accompanying this toolkit can be found at www.elschools.org

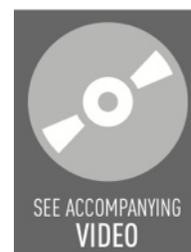
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Acknowledgments

Many Expeditionary Learning teachers, principals, instructional guides, students, and families—too many to name here—have contributed to this student-engaged assessment toolkit. Likewise, Expeditionary Learning staff, especially the school designers who work most closely with faculties as they implement these strategies, have worked hard to shape these tools. Particular thanks goes to David Grant, Ron Berger, Deborah Pinto, Dirk Matthias, Sharon Newman, Libby Woodfin, and Suzanne Plaut, and to lead writer Leah Rugen for bringing multiple voices together into a coherent whole. December 14, 2012

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