



Lesson Feedback: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly!

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Introduction

Danielle Lewis-Egonu, CEO at Cygnus Academies Trust



In the tapestry of our professional lives, feedback weaves a critical thread that guides our growth and shapes our practice. Constructive feedback can illuminate our path forward, but what happens when the feedback we receive is anything but helpful?

Early in my teaching career, I encountered an experience that tested my resilience and belief in the power of constructive dialogue. An interim headteacher, who was with our school for just one year, observed one of my Year 1 lessons. Anticipating insightful feedback, I was taken aback when she bluntly stated that she had **“never seen something so awful.”** When I earnestly asked for specifics on how I could improve, she replied that she couldn’t identify a single way to enhance the lesson.

Feeling stunned and disheartened, I turned to my previous mentors and tutors—individuals who had been instrumental in my development as an educator. They were as speechless as I was about the situation I had found myself in. Their disbelief and support reassured me that the issue was not a reflection of my abilities but perhaps a symptom of a larger disconnect.

All my colleagues throughout the school had the same experience of feedback from the interim, across the observation fortnight. When we were all subsequently reobserved by the local authority and school improvement advisors, a different picture emerged and as my mentors and tutors had predicted, there wasn’t a huge issue with the teaching and learning at the school.

This challenging experience taught me invaluable lessons, not just about resilience but also about the profound impact our words can have on others. It’s crucial to remember that our words carry weight—they can either build someone up or tear them down. As educators and leaders, we hold the responsibility to use our words to inspire, guide, and support.

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Introduction

Danielle Lewis-Egonu, CEO at Cygnus Academies Trust



Years later, when I stepped into the role of a senior leader and became the observer rather than the observed, I carried this awareness with me. I was determined to ensure that my approach to feedback was **constructive, supportive, and empowering**. The memory of receiving unhelpful criticism fuelled my commitment to fostering a positive environment where teachers felt valued and encouraged to grow.

I recall observing a lesson where a practitioner was trying out new teaching strategies. After the lesson, we sat down to discuss it. I began by highlighting the successes—the innovative activities that engaged students, the clear objectives set for the lesson, and the positive classroom atmosphere. Acknowledging these strengths not only affirmed the teacher's efforts but also built a foundation of trust.

We then collaboratively explored areas for development. Instead of pointing out flaws, we discussed **opportunities for enhancement**. For instance, we talked about incorporating opportunities that could deepen pupils' understanding. I assured the teacher that these areas would be supported through instructional coaching, offering ongoing guidance rather than one-time criticism. This approach aimed to empower rather than vilify, focusing on growth and continuous improvement.

The unhelpful feedback I received early on became a catalyst for how I approached leadership and mentorship. It reinforced the importance of delivering feedback with empathy and clarity, always aiming to **inspire improvement** rather than discourage. As teachers and leaders, our ultimate goal is to support each other in providing the best education possible.

What teachers say

We have all given and received feedback that could be described as good, bad, and downright ugly.

We asked senior leaders, middle leaders, and teachers to share their experiences.



Phil Banks

Director of Partnerships, Westcountry Schools Trust



The good

I suppose I am of an age where I didn't get too much feedback in my teaching career. It wasn't so much of a thing back then, other than the odd Ofsted inspection. Some of the best feedback I remember came informally from a classroom assistant that was working with me. She told me simply, 'slow down. They're hungry to learn but you're galloping through the feast.'

The beauty of this feedback is in its simplicity. It complimented what I was delivering, the feast, whilst also recommending that I could improve my delivery by raising my awareness of audience, and their ability to keep up.

Another great mentor once told me to deliver feedback as a 'sh*t sandwich', that is some good, then the bad, then finish with some more good. I find people listen more when you start and end on a positive.

The bad

There's a lot of bad, and most of it comes from remembering advice about using teaching pedagogy that no longer holds credence as effective. I remember being told to use brain gym or adapt lessons to ensure that I had engaged children with all different learning styles, we even had lesson planning sheets with VAK sections on them!

Recommendations must come from a place of research. We need to understand why we are recommending certain strategies so that they come from a place of expertise, rather than a fad. Fads have no place in education.

My second example would be the sort of feedback that is designed to catch the teacher out. That is, the observer is trying to prove themselves smarter than the observee by deliberately looking for something to criticise. I have seen this especially in the observation of really strong lessons. Observers are usually keen to justify their presence by finding something they can recommend, no matter how irrelevant to the lesson! I once saw an observer feedback to a teacher that the lesson would have been better if they had engaged with the children more during their individual task. It really wouldn't. The children got far more from working through the problem on their own and we often over support, especially when we are being observed. **If a lesson is great, tell the teacher it is great,** never try to justify your presence with unhelpful feedback.

The downright ugly

I remember a teacher complaining to me once that a senior leader had criticised their lesson but, when asked for some specific feedback on the issues, had simply been told, 'I don't know, I just wasn't feeling it today.'

To me, this is the worst form of feedback. If you are telling someone that something is not good enough, you need to be good enough to critically analyse why and offer constructive support. If you can't, you have no place critiquing a lesson at all!

Louise Lee

CEO, The Howard Partnership Trust



The good

The best feedback I received was as a brand-new teacher. Having followed a school-based teacher training route (Teach First), **the feedback I received was crucial** as I found my feet as a teacher whilst already being responsible for my own classes' progress. I was given great lesson feedback and then asked to role-play parts of future lessons by my tutor and practice this in advance, aloud in my empty classroom. This helped me, one of life's natural introverts, **find a 'teacher voice' and comfort with commanding a room**. This was over twenty years ago and my tutor was clearly ahead of her time, using instructional coaching techniques long before we'd coined the phrase!

The key ingredients of this great feedback included time and relevance as well as having a full feedback loop in place. By taking the **time to give feedback properly** and to do this in such a timely way, my tutor helped me develop quickly as a teacher. The relevance and clarity of the feedback enabled me to put this straight into practice. It was never overwhelming to take each step on board. She would then view the impact of this feedback, offering both praise as well as the next crucial step.

The bad

I think the worst feedback I've received was receiving none at all. There have been huge gulfs in my career when no one has given me any feedback. As a senior leader in a number of schools, there was often no lesson feedback with a feeling that we were somehow above this. I also rarely got feedback on anything else like assemblies or meetings. **I crave feedback to help me improve** and wish I'd had the confidence to ask for this proactively.

I do believe the Warren Buffet mantra that **'feedback is a gift'** and although sometimes, like other kinds of gifts, it isn't the one you wanted, it's always useful. As a Trust leader, we gather feedback systematically and formally from all stakeholder groups and use it to improve. If I went back to being a classroom teacher, I would definitely find more ways to routinely gather feedback and reflections from my students on their own learning and my teaching and use this to improve my planning and pedagogy.

The downright ugly

The ugliest feedback I remember is when it was personal. 'You don't deal well with uncertainty', for example – who does?! And 'You won't be looking forward to labour, because you're a control freak' the day before I began maternity leave...

The key here is that both reflections were powerful and useful to me in a way raising things that others knew about me but I hadn't recognised myself, but the manner of their delivery, particularly as they came long after I'd started working with these colleagues, made them feel hurtful instead of helpful.

Brené Brown is right that **'clear is kind'** when it comes to difficult feedback, but kindness is certainly not blurting out the previously unsaid at the wrong moment! We all have our blind spots - the phrases we use too much, for example - and should be committed to helping everyone we work with develop by giving them timely, detailed, and kind feedback throughout our careers.

Peter Hughes

CEO, Mossbourne Federation



The good

I'm having to go back deep into my memory to find something good. The bad and the ugly are far easier and more vivid. The best piece of feedback I received was not long after I took up headship. As I recall it was not long after I took up headship. It was simple and to the point. It came as a form of advice and had a profound impact and still does to this day.

“Talk to your Heads of Learning Areas”

The idea of making time to talk to and get to know my middle leaders is so obvious to me now. I sometimes wonder if I am gaslighting myself when I recall it being given as feedback. Whilst not lesson feedback, it was feedback. Those seven words opened up a methodology which enabled me to **transform my practice**, which would ultimately have a **far-reaching impact** on the outcomes and experiences of children and young people across my schools to this day. It was the nudge that directed me down an even better path.

The bad

There are three pieces of feedback that immediately spring to mind:

- That lesson would have been better if you'd included group work.
- It was clear Sam, Farhana, and Fatima understood the work. They answered two questions correctly. You should have moved them on.
- The school's specialism is Art, how did you incorporate that into your lesson? You know the school's specialism has to be seen in the lesson for it to be outstanding.

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Peter Hughes

CEO, Mossbourne Federation



Where do I start? Group work or you should have moved them on? It is such a toss-up to decide which piece of feedback I found the **most frustrating**. Ultimately, during my time as a teacher in the classroom, receiving feedback that you didn't get the magical 'Outstanding' was a knock, at the time, especially as it had the potential to affect pay and promotion.

Neither pay or promotion should ever be directly linked to feedback

I feel that is an entire article by itself, so I'll leave that one before I drift off track. The reality was most staff understood that you had to play the game, and attempting to squeeze art into every maths lesson (emphasis on the every here) was a joke. Good thing we only had three observations a year, which were announced, making planning the Maths lesson, sorry every lesson, with art easier.

For clarity, for me, the bad was squeezing art in or being told I had to do group work was bad feedback because I, and most other teachers, **knew it was wrong**. It was someone taking a philosophy and trying to apply it to every situation.

One of the core tenets of feedback is specificity!

The downright ugly

For me, Ugly feedback is **dangerous feedback**. There is nothing more dangerous than well meaning, seemingly sensible feedback that is ultimately wrong. That is why, "They answered two questions correctly. You should have moved them on." is ugly. It's pernicious. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing.

When a maths teacher is encouraged to move children on because they got two questions right, they are being encouraged to remove the practice so critical to a child's mathematical development. Pupils need the **opportunity to practise**. It builds speed, automates skills, and ultimately frees up working memory for more complex and challenging mathematical concepts.



Gavin Palmer

Headteacher, International School,
Costa del Sol.



The good

Personally, I believe good feedback adheres to two key principles*:

1. Specific to the context (situation, school setting)
2. Specific to the domain (task)

Adherence to these two principles ensures that **feedback is underpinned by a clear rationale and that it is relevant**, thus enabling the recipient to move forward in addressing one of the many complex issues that we might encounter as educators whilst equally supporting their personal development.

To this end, one of the most impactful pieces of feedback that I ever received came during my NQT year. Students were working well in my GCSE Spanish classroom, but—in a mixed-ability group—there would always be five or six students who completed the work before the majority.

Despite always providing an extension task, the students would be reticent to engage with it; that was until my NQT mentor and then Head of Department gave me the following feedback: “Ensure that extension tasks challenge students cognitively as opposed to simply increasing the volume of work students have to complete.” **This feedback was transformative for my practice in** that it not only shifted my understanding of how to meaningfully challenge students in the classroom; equally, it made me aware of the capacity of a challenging extension task to visibly **increase motivation to progress** in the subject.

*I will add one caveat: on occasions where it is necessary for the person feeding back to prompt a teacher or leader to actively reflect and arrive at a solution for a problem, these two principles serve to guide them in their questioning as opposed to being applied directly to a piece of feedback on how to proceed.

The bad

It will not come as a surprise that, for me, bad feedback is that which does not adhere to the two earlier-mentioned principles. A particularly poor piece of feedback that sticks in my memory was being told that I “needed to put more time into organising extra-curricular activities” from a senior colleague when I was new in post as a middle manager with the objective of raising attainment in the subject across the school.

The absence of a clear rationale and a ‘how’ left me perplexed as to what to do next—was this feedback referencing the logistics of the extra-curricular activities in our subject area or was it a suggestion that we should invest more time into expanding our offering?

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Gavin Palmer

Headteacher, International School,
Costa del Sol.



The downright ugly

I strongly believe that, following an interview process, every candidate is entitled to a face-to-face breakdown of how they performed across the different tasks and how they might improve, such that, regardless of whether they are appointed or not, the process is **maximally developmental**. This is a hallmark of my own practice as a leader and it has been customary for me to request feedback when I have undertaken such a process myself. Whilst I have been fortunate to receive some excellent feedback that has undoubtedly helped me to develop professionally, I have also received feedback that was unhelpful.

Arguably one of the most unhelpful pieces of feedback that I have received in recent memory was following an interview process for a senior position in an international school, where I was informed that I “wasn’t international enough when compared to the other candidate.”

Upon probing for an elaboration on how one can differentiate between a professional with experience that is more significantly weighted towards the UK and one with greater international experience and thereafter asking how one might develop the latter aspect, the answer given was that “it is difficult to quantify; it is more of a feeling.”



Conclusion

Feedback is **essential to professional growth**, but its impact depends entirely on its delivery and reception. Through personal and collective experiences, it becomes evident that feedback can shape careers, practices, and attitudes—for better or worse (or good, bad, and ugly). The examples shared reflect a spectrum of feedback, from constructive and transformative to ambiguous and demoralising. These experiences underscore the importance of **specificity, empathy, and clarity in feedback**, all vital for empowering teachers and fostering meaningful progress.

As educators and leaders, the responsibility lies with us to ensure that feedback serves its purpose as a **motivator for growth**, not a barrier, which the shared experience in this article demonstrates.

Effective feedback focuses on context and subject relevance, providing actionable insights and promoting reflection. Conversely, bad or ugly feedback—vague, poorly delivered, or even harmful—can derail confidence, skew priorities, and perpetuate misconceptions.

Reflecting on these narratives highlights the **profound impact** of language and intent. The words we say and use are important! The language we use and the intent behind our feedback have a far-reaching impact. It's a reminder to be mindful and considerate in our feedback, as it can either inspire or disempower.

Whether guiding new teachers or supporting experienced staff, feedback must be approached with the understanding that it is not just about pointing out flaws but also about building bridges to improvement. This ethos aligns with the overarching goal of education: to nurture potential and create environments where **everyone can thrive**. Children, after all, need environments where learning is the norm and this can only be achieved where teachers have a **growth mindset** themselves and the desire to keep trying to develop their practice.

These reflections make it clear that feedback should never be a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it must be tailored to the individual, context, and objectives. Constructive feedback builds confidence and competence and contributes to a **positive culture** of learning, collaboration, and shared purpose. By committing to providing feedback that is thoughtful, specific, and empowering, we uphold the values of our profession and reinforce the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to **grow and succeed**.

The stories shared within this piece highlight that good feedback has the power to inspire and uplift. They also show that, in contrast, bad feedback can be demotivating and harmful.

Ultimately, the lessons learned by all the contributors serve as a reminder to **prioritise constructive dialogue**, ensuring feedback is a tool for development rather than a source of discouragement.

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Conclusion

Top Tips

1. Be specific and actionable

Provide feedback that is clear, contextually relevant, and tied to actionable steps. Avoid vague statements or overly general advice, as specificity helps the teacher in front of you understand exactly what needs improvement and how to achieve it.

2. Lead with positives

Start by acknowledging strengths and successes. Highlighting what is working well builds trust, boosts confidence, and sets a constructive tone for discussing areas of growth.

3. Focus on growth

Frame feedback as an opportunity for improvement rather than criticism. Use a collaborative approach, such as discussing solutions or offering support mechanisms like coaching or professional development, to ensure the practitioner feels empowered rather than defeated.