

Feedback vs Feedforward: Shifting the Paradigm in Learning and Performance

Indrajeet Murari Acharjee

IBDP Economics Teacher. JBCN International School. Oshiwara, Mumbai.

Abstract:

This study examines the increasing importance of feedforward as a revolutionary pedagogical approach in contemporary education. Beyond the conventional boundaries of evaluative feedback, feedforward is concerned with future improvement and developmental advice, providing learners with constructive hints prior to or in the course of a learning activity. This change facilitates a more optimistic and proactive teaching and learning strategy, minimizing learner anxiety and maximizing motivation. In contrast to feedback, which commonly focuses on past mistakes, feedforward promotes the growth mindset because it instills in students the idea that their strengths can be developed further through effort and thoughtful consideration (Dweck, 2006). It creates a classroom culture that values progress and potential more than judgment and criticism.

The research underscores the fact that feedforward not only enhances learner participation but also fortifies student-teacher relationships by facilitating open communication and reflective practice. Through a focus on actionable guidance and forward planning, feedforward enables students to develop self-regulation and ownership of their learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, within the framework of formative assessment, feedforward acts as an essential bridge between teaching and assessment, leading students toward mastery while facilitating ongoing growth (William, 2011). The incorporation of feedforward strategies into pedagogy has the potential to improve academic achievement, create a positive learning environment, and develop lifelong learning skills. As education systems place greater emphasis on personalized and student-centered learning, the use of feedforward becomes not only pertinent, but critical to effective and sustainable learning outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feedback has long been the main pillar of enhancement in organizational development and personal growth. However, in recent years, the term feedforward has surfaced with a more proactive and positive outlook toward the future. Marshall Goldsmith synthesized the term feedforward which represents a change in perspective from critiquing actions of the past to offering suggestions for future behavior (Goldsmith, 2002). This type of change is vital for places that require constant innovation and agility. While feedback evaluates what has happened, yield action in the future. This encourages growth and motivation.

This research aims to assess the efficacy of feedforward and feedback, discussing five distinct features of feedforward, and analyzing its relevance in contemporary settings. This paper develops an argument based on various scholarly articles, educational theories, and organizational case studies to advocate for the adoption of feedforward strategies. The study also integrates a literature review to contextualize both concepts highlighting the discourse contemporary focus on feedforward.

2. Feedback vs Feedforward: A Comparative Overview

Aspect	Feedback	Feedforward
Time Orientation	Past-focused	Future-focused
Tone and Emotional Response	Often critical; may demotivate	Encouraging; forward-looking
Usefulness	Sometimes vague or retrospective	Actionable and improvement-oriented
Perception	Can feel like judgment	Feels like support or coaching
Goal	Evaluate what has been done	Guide what can be done

Feedback typically answers the question, “What did I do wrong/right?”, whereas feedforward answers, “What can I do better next time?” This subtle yet powerful difference underlines a shift in how we view learning and performance improvement.

3. Literature Review

1. 3.a. Marshall Goldsmith (2002): "Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback"

Goldsmith popularized the concept of feedforward as a management technique, highlighting that individuals react more favorably to hearing about how they can do better instead of being criticized for what they have done in the past. His writing established the ground for a new paradigm in coaching. "Feedforward helps people see and concentrate on a positive future, not a failed past."

2. 3.b. Carol Dweck (2006): "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success"

Dweck's "growth mindset" is closely related to feedforward. She believed that if one thinks abilities can be cultivated, one will learn and be resilient—principles to which feedforward is actively devoted.

3. 3.c. John Hattie & Helen Timperley (2007): "The Power of Feedback"

Their research indicated that feedback is most effective when it addresses three questions: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? Feedforward precisely targets the third question—Where to next?—and hence it's particularly effective.

4. 3.d. Stone & Heen (2014): "Thanks for the Feedback"

In their book, they discuss how feedback tends to elicit emotional reactions that restrict its impact. They advocate for defensiveness-reducing feedback conversations—something feedforward does by nature.

4. Why Feedforward is Superior to Feedback

1. Growth Over Judgment

Feedforward is growth-oriented, providing recommendations and advice for improvement in the future. Feedback tends to be about assessing past performance, which can lead to defensiveness. Feedforward sidesteps this by eliminating judgment and concentrating on possibility.

2. Motivational Instead of Discouraging

Traditional feedback has a tendency to sound like criticism, particularly if delivered poorly. Feedforward is inherently constructive and encouraging. It boosts confidence and gets people ready to act on the recommendations without the emotional weight of past errors.

3. More Practical and Forward-Looking

Feedforward delivers actionable feedback, and it is simpler to implement right away. It is well-suited to goal-setting techniques and coaching models, so it is perfectly suited to performance improvement within schools, organizations, and leadership development.

4. Minimizes Fear and Maximizes Openness

Since feedforward does not contain direct critique, it promotes open discussion and teamwork. Employees and students are more open to feedback, as it creates a psychologically safe space for ongoing improvement.

5. Suitable for All Levels of Performance

Feedforward may be used with both underperformers and high performers. It's not merely for improvement but for optimization, meaning that anyone may always optimize and fine-tune their skills.

5. Five Unique Features of Feedforward

1. Future Orientation

Feedforward does not linger on failures. It concentrates on improvement. This future orientation instills more proactive and positive attitudes, motivating learners or employees to be proactive and set goals.

2. Non-Judgmental Nature

Feedforward is not like feedback that can be perceived as evaluative or critical. Feedforward is supportive in nature. It suggests without blaming, hence minimizing resistance and creating motivation.

3. Encouragement of Innovation

By keeping the focus on opportunities instead of constraints, feedforward creates avenues for innovative thinking. It encourages people to look for novel ways and means, thus serving as a driving force for innovation.

4. Scalability Across Domains

In education, the corporate world, leadership development coaching, or interpersonal interactions, feedforward is scalable and versatile. It can facilitate improvement at every level—individual, team, or organization.

5. Builds a Coaching Culture

Feedforward quite easily lends itself to models of coaching. Feedforward inspires managers, educators, and coaches to take on a supportive role, thus changing the culture from one of judgment to one of empowerment.

6. Importance of Feedforward

1. Improving Learning Outcomes in Education

Feedforward supports contemporary pedagogy focused on formative assessment and continuous learning. Rather than merely grading or ranking learners, feedforward informs them about what to develop and how.

2. Developing a Growth Mindset

Feedforward motivates learners and professionals to view difficulties as opportunities for development instead of threats to identity. This supports a culture of resilience, self-awareness, and ongoing growth.

3. Improving Workplace Performance

In the workplace, feedforward helps employee growth without the emotional residue of traditional performance appraisal. It builds morale, motivation, and productivity.

4. Enabling Effective Leadership

Excellent leaders do not merely correct mistakes—they inspire future greatness. Feedforward helps leaders lead with vision, clarity, and compassion, building environments that are performance-oriented and psychologically safe.

5. Enabling Constructive Relationships

Due to its constructive, cooperative approach, feedforward enhances communication and relationships. In whatever relationship--teacher and student, manager and staff, colleague to colleague--it creates mutual respect and trust.

7. Significance of Feedforward in Learning and Teaching

Feedforward has come to be a revolutionary pedagogical strategy that has revolutionized the classic model from evaluative to forward-looking developmental feedback. Within institutions of learning, feedforward precipitates attention to future development as opposed to past errors, which reduces student disaffection and increases motivation to a great extent (Carless, 2007). In contrast to feedback that typically points out what didn't work, feedforward provides supportive advice on ways in which students can do better on future tasks, encouraging a more supportive learning atmosphere. It encourages growth mindset, where learners assume their talents can be cultivated through effort and strategy (Dweck, 2006). It encourages forward thinking, deeper mental engagement, and enables learners to formulate clear, attainable goals for improving academically.

Additionally, feedforward enhances better student-teacher relations and enhances achievement by promoting communication and reflection. By providing learners with feedback about how to make things better beforehand or in the course of activity, they can more likely claim ownership of the learning process and establish self-regulation skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This anticipatory kind of intervention generates a positive learning culture free from judgment within the classroom. In formative assessment practice, feedforward serves as a bridge between instruction and assessment, leading students to mastery and encouraging ongoing development (Wiliam, 2011). Therefore, integrating feedforward into pedagogical practice not only improves academic achievement but also encourages lifelong learning dispositions.

8. Conclusion

The transition from feedback to feedforward is more than a mere change in words—it is a shift in how we go about improvement, learning, and development. Feedforward is forward-oriented, non-critical, actionable, and empowering. It harmonizes perfectly with contemporary educational paradigms, leadership theories, and human development models.

Although feedback remains relevant in some assessment situations, feedforward is the better instrument for initiating change, instilling confidence, and developing a culture of ongoing improvement. The future of learning and performance is not in analyzing the past, but in creating improved tomorrows—and feedforward is the key.