

After conferencing with several students, a Catch and Release Critique Lesson (which we introduced in Learning Target 3, Challenge #5) might be a good next step. This kind of brief, in-the-moment critique lesson would allow you to address a common issue that has arisen as you have conferred with students. It is a great way to give helpful feedback to the whole class before you proceed with individual conferences.



Challenge #8: I give verbal and written feedback to students all the time, and they don't seem to learn from it. They continue to have the same weaknesses in their work.

TRY THIS: USE YOUR FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE *FUTURE* WORK
(NOT THE CURRENT WORK)

Think back to when you were a student yourself. Your teacher gave you assignments, and you probably just wanted to get them completed and accepted as good work, or at least passable work. She marked up your paper, made some comments, and you changed what she asked for so that she was satisfied. If you had weaknesses in certain conventions or grammatical structures, in framing your thesis or writing a strong conclusion, for example, fixing this particular paper and getting it accepted was still your real focus. The critique did not launch you on a personal mission to address your areas of weakness as a writer.

But that is exactly what we really need critique to do for students. As teachers, we act as if this assignment, and getting it right, is what matters. But in truth, the assignment doesn't matter at all unless it teaches something new. Just getting a paper or a math problem set corrected and acceptable is fairly meaningless. Instead, we need to use our critique time with students to help them discover and consider what they are struggling with and share ideas together of how they might improve. We want students to recognize and own the area they need to learn about and practice, to commit to improving their skills, and to create a plan with you about how they will improve and demonstrate their new learning.

For example, let's say you have a student whose written papers are painfully stilted. He follows the outline format and organizer you have given out but does so literally, with no voice or persuasive language. His essays read like this: "In this essay I will explain why _____. My first point is _____. The evidence I found for that is _____. My second point is _____. The evidence I found for that is _____. My conclusion is that _____." You have encouraged him in written comments on his papers, or verbally in conferences, to elaborate, to use detail, to vary his sentence structure and paragraph structure, but you get this same kind of essay each time. And this student is not the only one with this problem, just a more extreme example of what many students do, causing you to make similar comments on many student papers.

So, you change your tactics. You decide that getting these particular papers fixed is not the purpose of your comments on papers, or, if you have time, your conferences with students. Instead, you lead a critique lesson with the class, using an inspiring essay by an anonymous student that has the strengths that you wish their essays did. You analyze the strengths carefully, name them, and discuss with students how to borrow strategies from this paper. Then you ask each student to fill out an index card or a form in which they each commit to the strategies they will use in their next paper. Fixing their current papers is no longer important; creating a much-improved *next* paper is the goal.

When you receive your next set of essays, your written comments are based on the commitments that students have made: where did they succeed; what more could they do? If you have the time to conference one-to-one with targeted students or all students, you pull out their cards of improvement commitments and go through them carefully while looking at their essays. The conversations you have with students are no longer about meeting *your* expectations but about reaching goals that *they* set.

TRY THIS: BRING IN EXPERTS TO PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL THINKING AND VOCABULARY

Students have been getting feedback from their teachers ever since they started school. After a while, the teacher's voice in their heads may sound dull and uninspiring. By contrast, when experts from the community or professionals who make their living from the skills and themes that students are trying to learn come into your classroom, magic happens. Experts can teach your students how professionals think about your topic. They can demonstrate and coach students in the skills and vocabulary of the discipline. And students take expert feedback very seriously, especially if implementing it with care and determination will enable them to create something that looks and has the impact of professional work. The case study that follows illustrates the power of community experts.



Case Study

Enlisting Community Experts to Improve and Deepen Student Work at the Inter-district School for Arts and Communication (ISAAC) in New London, Connecticut

When a group of 94 diverse sixth-grade students took on a challenging project to interview local refugees and immigrants and create a professional-quality book to honor their courage and their stories, they analyzed models of interviews, photographs, and books from the professional world. They looked at models created by other students, and they critiqued their own work continually in the process. They worked with an immigration lawyer to build expertise in the legal issues of immigration and refugee status. They worked with a professional photographer who taught the students photographic technique and the language of light and composition. And they worked with an expert from Yale medical school—a specialist who taught doctors how to interview patients about health histories, including patients who may be shy or not fluent in English—to build students' skills as interviewers and teach them the vocabulary of *listening*.

After they had learned from the professionals, ISAAC students invited feedback from the experts on their own work in progress. Then they went back to their own drafts and revised again and again. "We made mistakes, and we kept persevering," said one student. "We were responsible for sharing their story with the world, and we knew we had to be professional."

The result of this magnificent collaboration between community experts and powerfully engaged students was an award-winning interactive art exhibit that was exhibited in libraries, universities, art galleries, and the Connecticut Statehouse. The student work also culminated in a published book honoring the immigrants' stories with text and photographs—with the proceeds from book sales going to help the immigrants' lives. At this time, multiple immigrants have had the legal expenses for their green cards covered by book profits.

You can learn more about this impressive project, and how they used models, critique, and descriptive feedback, in an exhibit on the Models of Excellence website: <https://modelsofexcellence.ededucation.org/tours/community-faces-4>.