

# THE IMPACT OF ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN VISUAL ARTS

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## Introduction

In Visual Arts education, feedback plays a vital role in shaping student learning and artistic growth. However, the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on its content but also on how students engage with it. This action research explores the power of actionable feedback, defined as feedback that is specific, timely, and includes clear steps for improvement. This study compares the impact of actionable feedback with traditional feedback on student performance, engagement, and motivation in middle/high school Visual Arts classes. Research supports the idea that formative, goal-oriented feedback enhances student agency, motivation, and performance (Black & William, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

## Background of the Problem

At Universal American School, as Visual Arts teachers we observed that students often received feedback but did not consistently revise or reflect on their work. Despite frequent teacher comments, student growth appeared limited, and engagement was uneven. To address this issue, a structured feedback framework was developed and implemented in one class (Group A), while another class (Group B) continued with traditional feedback methods. This study was conducted over a six-week period to determine whether actionable feedback could lead to measurable improvements in student outcomes. Research shows that feedback has the greatest impact on learning when it is clear, purposeful, and prompts students to take action toward improvement (Hattie, 2009). Additionally, for feedback to be effective, students must be active participants in the process, engaging in self-assessment and reflection (Boud, 2000).

- Group A received structured actionable feedback three times per week, setting personal artistic goals after each session.
- Group B continued with traditional feedback methods that did not mandate revision.

## Literature Review

Effective feedback plays a critical role in enhancing student learning, particularly in creative disciplines like Visual Arts. Black and William (1998) emphasize that formative assessment, when integrated into instruction, can significantly raise achievement by guiding rather than merely measuring learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) highlight that feedback has one of the strongest effects on learning outcomes, especially when it clearly identifies the gap between current and desired performance and includes steps to close that gap.

Brookhart (2008) adds that effective feedback should be timely, specific, and task-focused. This helps students improve their work without feeling personally criticized an important distinction in subjects involving personal expression. Sadler (1989) outlines three key elements of formative feedback: students must know the expected standard, compare their current work against it, and take action to improve. This structured process supports growth in the arts, where creativity must still meet assessment criteria.

Shute (2008) echoes this, noting that feedback is most useful when it is clear, non-judgmental, and offers concrete suggestions. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) extend the idea by arguing that good feedback fosters self-regulation—enabling students to internalize criteria and monitor their own progress. Boud and Molloy (2013) further suggest that sustainable feedback develops students' long-term capacity to seek, interpret, and use feedback effectively.

Together, these theories show that feedback is most effective when it is actionable, reflective, and student-centered key qualities that foster meaningful artistic development and independence in Visual Arts education.

## Methods

In a Grade 10 Visual Arts class, students submitted sketches for a portrait unit. Instead of general comments, We teachers provided specific, actionable feedback: "Use lighter crosshatching to create smoother transitions on the cheek." Students then compared their work to a success criterion rubric, revised their pieces, and reflected on changes in a journal. Over time, students demonstrated clearer tonal control and became more self-directed aligning with Sadler's (1989) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) feedback principles.

## Research Questions

1. What is the impact of structured, actionable feedback on student performance in Visual Arts?
2. How does acting on feedback influence students' motivation and engagement with their artwork?
3. How do students perceive the value of feedback when they are required to respond to it?

## Methodology

The intervention introduced a structured feedback cycle for Group A, in which students received targeted feedback three times per week. Each session required students to set specific, short-term action goals based on the feedback received. In contrast, Group B continued to receive general feedback without structured follow-up or goal-setting. To monitor progress, teachers used assessment rubrics, maintained student portfolios, and collected self-reflection logs, allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of both individual growth and engagement over time (see **Table 1**).

## Participants

Two middle/high school Visual Arts classes participated in the study. Each group had a similar number of students with comparable skill levels at the start of the research period.

- Group A received structured actionable feedback.
- Group B continued with traditional feedback.

**Table 1**  
**Intervention & Feedback Cycle**

Component	Group A – Structured Feedback Cycle	Group B – General Feedback
Initial Evaluation	Detailed rubric-based assessment identifying specific areas for improvement.	Broad comments such as "good job" or "needs improvement," often without referencing specific criteria or standards.
Goal-Setting	Students set short-term, actionable goals in response to feedback.	No formal goal-setting; students may receive verbal prompts like "try to improve shading" without follow-up.
Revision & Reflection	Students revise work based on targeted feedback and document their process in self-assessment logs.	Limited or no revision required; students may or may not revisit their work after initial feedback.
Feedback Frequency	Feedback provided three times per week with ongoing tracking of progress.	Feedback given occasionally, typically after task completion, with no systematic frequency.
Student Ownership	High students engage in active reflection and track their improvement.	Low feedback is passively received with little opportunity for reflection or self-direction.
Teacher Role	Facilitator and coach, guiding students through continuous improvement.	Evaluator feedback is one-way, focused on correction rather than development.

## Data Collection

- Data collection included:
- Rubric-based assessments of student artwork
- Student self-reflections and action plans
- Observational notes on classroom engagement and student-teacher interactions
- Pre- and post-surveys measuring perceptions of feedback
- Comparison of student portfolios at the beginning and end of the cycle

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data from rubric scores were analyzed for percentage improvement. Qualitative data – student reflections and survey responses – were coded for recurring themes, including: “ownership,” “clarity,” “motivation,” and “resistance to feedback.”

## Results

Group A (Actionable Feedback Group) demonstrated a notable improvement, with an average rubric score increase of 22% (see **Table 2**). Students in this group exhibited greater artistic risk-taking and refinement in their work (see **Figure 1**). Their reflections evolved to become more strategic and detailed, accompanied by heightened classroom engagement and participation. Additionally, students showed stronger ownership of the creative process. One student captured this experience, stating:

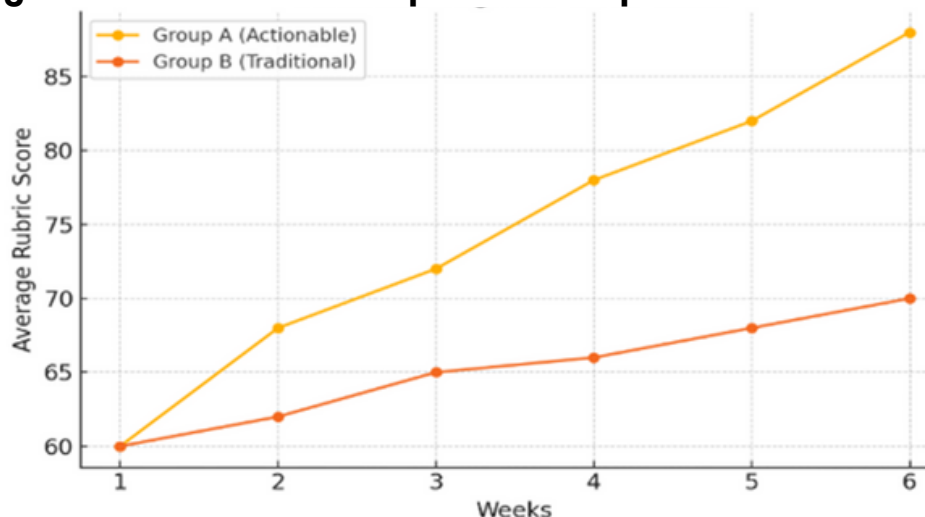
*“At first, I felt a bit nervous—like, ‘Am I doing it wrong?’ But the feedback is not just about pointing out mistakes. It actually helps me see how to fix things and what to try next.” (A.B.)*

In contrast, Group B (Traditional Feedback Group) showed a more modest average rubric score improvement of 10%. Students in this group engaged in little to no revision unless explicitly prompted, and their reflections tended to be superficial. Engagement levels remained steady but lacked inspiration or significant growth (see **Figure 2**).

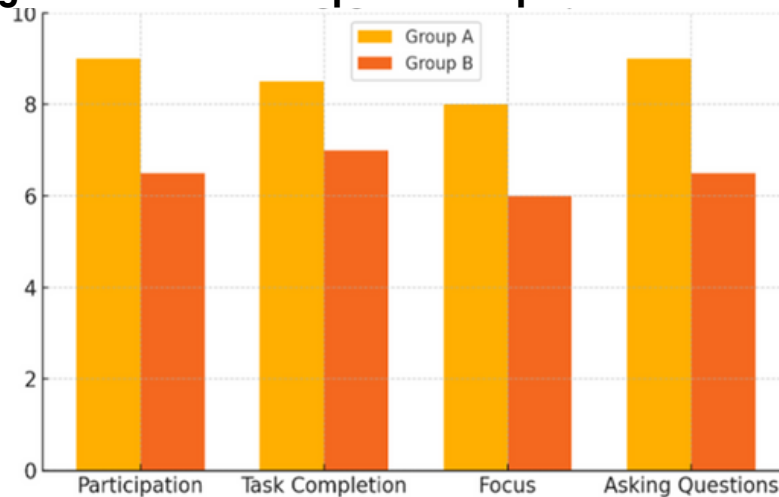
**Table 2**  
**Comparison of Rubric Score Improvements**

Group	Average Improvement
Group A	22%
Group B	11%

**Figure 1**  
**Artistic Progress Over Time for Group A and Group B**



**Figure 2**  
**Student Engagement Levels: Group A vs Group B**



## Discussion and Reflections

The research clearly indicates that structured, actionable feedback fosters greater improvement in both the quality of student artwork and student engagement. Group A students not only improved more significantly but also demonstrated deeper self-reflection and motivation. These results are consistent with literature emphasizing the power of formative, action-oriented feedback.

One student described this shift:

*"Instead of guessing what the teacher wants, I know what I need to improve and how to do it. It feels like the teacher is working with me, not just judging me." (T.T.)*

As practitioner-researchers, we experienced a transformation in how feedback was perceived and delivered. Shifting from evaluative comments to feedback-as-dialogue required more time and planning but led to more authentic student growth. This model of feedback could be adapted across disciplines to support independent learning and metacognitive development.

Teachers implementing actionable feedback should consider:

- Allowing students to co-construct feedback criteria to deepen engagement.
- Using self-reflection logs to strengthen metacognitive skills.
- Encouraging structured revisions, rather than leaving feedback open-ended.

## Final Reflections

Students who engaged with actionable feedback developed not only their skills but also a stronger connection to their creative process. One student noted:

*"The feedback pushes me to think more about my choices and try new things. Over time, I feel more confident and proud of my work because I can see the progress, and I know it came from my own effort and reflection." (A.R.)*

## Conclusion

This action research demonstrates that integrating structured, actionable feedback into the Visual Arts classroom leads to significant improvements in student engagement, skill development, and reflective practice. When feedback is specific and targeted – and paired with opportunities for students to set short-term goals and evaluate their progress – it fosters greater ownership of learning and encourages a more deliberate, thoughtful approach to artistic development.

Traditional feedback methods, often limited to general comments without structured follow-up, can leave students uncertain about how to improve. In contrast, the implementation of a consistent feedback cycle clarifies expectations, provides a concrete path forward, and reduces the ambiguity often associated with assessing creative work. This approach not only enhances technical skills but also cultivates self-regulation, persistence, and a growth mindset.

Importantly, the findings suggest that such a feedback model supports a diverse range of learners by making success criteria transparent and accessible. As students begin to recognize their own progress and understand how to improve, their confidence and intrinsic motivation increase accordingly.

Future research may explore how actionable feedback frameworks can be adapted across disciplines, educational levels, and cultural contexts. Additionally, investigating the long-term effects on student creativity, academic resilience, and sustained motivation would provide deeper insight into the broader impact of formative feedback. Overall, this study advocates for a shift in classroom assessment practices – toward feedback that is intentional, student-centered, and designed to support continuous growth.

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