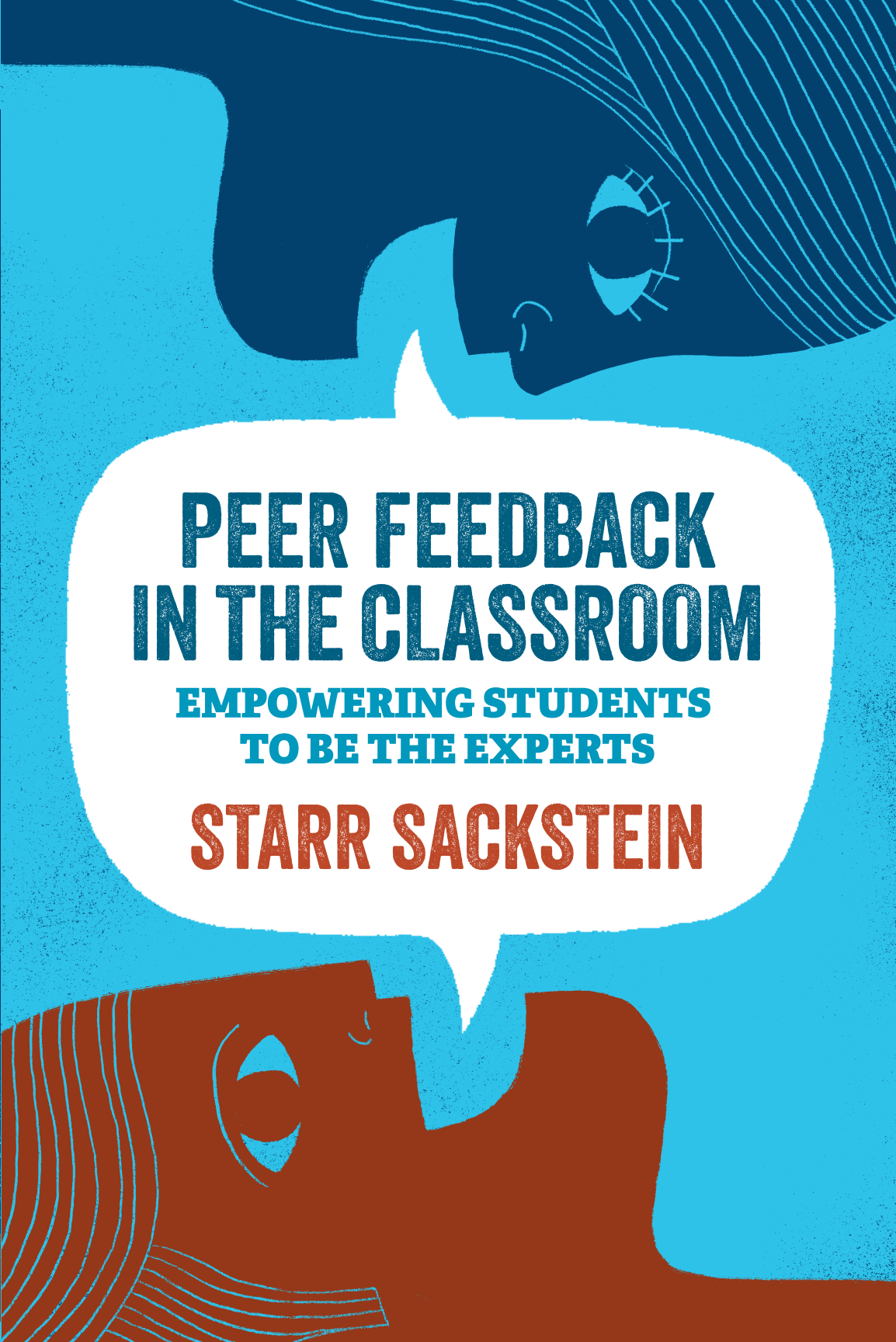
PEER FEEDBACK
IN THE CLASSROOM
EMPOWERING STUDENTS
TO BE THE EXPERTS
STARR SACKSTEIN

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Empowering Students to Be the Experts

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INTRODUCTION

Feedback. It's the moment in the learning process when students get the most personalized instruction possible. Between acknowledgment of what has improved and strategies provided for further improvement, what educators say and how we say it deeply influences the progress of each student.

Various educational researchers have explored the cognitive benefits of using feedback as a part of learning and found that effective feedback enhances both the giver's and the receiver's learning and development (see Brookhart, 2008). John Hattie's article "Feedback in Schools" (2012a) discusses in depth the research around intentional feedback, including its benefits and the specifics of how to do it well. Note the word *intentional*; this is key. In her book *Grit* (2016), Angela Duckworth discusses the necessity of intentional practice and goal setting to better inform feedback and mastery growth.

In my own experience as a classroom teacher, getting feedback on my performance from administration, colleagues, and even myself after viewing video recordings of my lessons has enabled me to pinpoint areas of needed growth and move forward with specific strategies in those areas, later repeating the feedback loop to ensure continued improvement.

Now imagine empowering *students* to provide one another with this type of feedback.

The Power of Peer Feedback

For a long time, I thought it was my sole responsibility to provide feedback to students. Arrogantly, I believed that I was the only one who could do the job properly. (After all, I'm the one with the degree, right?)

Time is the greatest teacher. Having taught many wonderful students over the years, I've learned that student-to-student feedback is

often received more positively than teacher-to-student feedback. With basic instruction and ongoing support, students can learn to be exceptional peer strategists, providing thoughtful insight into what works from an audience's perspective and offering constructive strategies for improvement.

A side benefit of empowering students to provide feedback to one another is the awareness they themselves gain as learners. Teaching is perhaps the ultimate expression of learning. Providing students with regular opportunities to give and receive peer feedback enriches their learning experiences in powerful ways.

How This Book Came About

As a media adviser, I used to facilitate my school's online media outlet's content and revision process—until I realized that letting students run the show would provide an exceptional learning experience. Now, student reporters come up with the ideas for stories and submit drafts to student editors who, in turn, provide initial and follow-up feedback. Throughout the process of readying a piece for publication on the website, at least four student leaders work with each student reporter, ensuring optimal development of stories and student reporting skills as well as accuracy of content for a wide reading audience.

Delegating control to students has freed me up to conduct individual conferences with students who need more targeted help with their writing. These conferences yield further information to relay to the student leaders, who can use it to better serve the student reporters. Ensuring that the student leaders are armed with what they need to look for and how best to advise the other students to proceed is an important part of the process.

My experience transforming a school newspaper from a faculty-led publication to a student-led enterprise led me to realize the value of incorporating peer feedback into *any* class. And thus this book was born.

How This Book Is Organized

My goal with this book is to help you pass the power to students and provide them with the tools they need to give meaningful feedback to one another while you gather the data *you* need to provide appropriate instruction within a workshop-style classroom. Workshops, which are key to the approach outlined in this book, provide students with mini-lessons specifically aligned to success criteria and then have students put their learning directly into practice. This student-centered approach provides time for students to work cooperatively and independently as well as for the teacher to address different levels of need more flexibly throughout the class period.

I have divided the book into three parts. Chapters 1–3 explore the power of feedback and what meaningful feedback looks like in the classroom. Chapters 4 and 5 will help you prepare students for and introduce them to the feedback process. Chapters 6 and 7 address the nuts and bolts of peer feedback. I have included extended reflections from experienced practitioners of peer feedback that express, in students' and teachers' own words, the approach's powerful effect on learning and teaching.

Envision a classroom where all students work cooperatively to further their own learning and have the time and space to work with classmates who need help that used to be given only by the teacher. Sound good? Then you'll be excited to know that it not only is possible but also will change the way teaching and learning happen in your classroom.

PART 1

THE POWER OF FEEDBACK

BLANK

1

THE RATIONALE FOR TEACHING STUDENTS TO PROVIDE PEER FEEDBACK

For too long, learners have been robbed of opportunities to exercise agency in their own learning. The traditional system that sets students up as subordinates to the teacher in the room makes it nearly impossible for them to truly own their learning. In this paradigm, the teacher is the one who has the power to issue strategies and feedback while the students are stuck waiting for the teacher to provide it. Unfortunately, in classrooms that usually contain one teacher to at least 20 students, students often have a long wait.

Imagine how the dynamic would change if we empowered all of the students in the room to provide meaningful feedback. Students would no longer need to wait passively to learn but be able to take responsibility for and actively move forward in their own learning process. This chapter explores why we should give students a greater role in their own learning—and the elements that need to be in place to do so.

Peer Feedback Empowers Students to Be Experts

Every student has the potential to be an expert. Our first job in the classroom is to get to know our students so that we can identify and expand on their strengths, in the process empowering and teaching them to be effective peer experts. Every content area or topic offers different opportunities for students to shine. By giving students the responsibility to share their expertise with one another, we are engaging them in the highest level of learning: asking them to teach. This mode of teaching and learning also naturally differentiates the learning because each student brings his or her own perspective, ideas, and preferences. Students see firsthand that there's no single "right" way to learn or teach.

There is no longer a need for teachers to be the only experts in the room. In fact, with the plethora of resources available online, the way

we learn has changed so much that it isn't uncommon for students to know more about certain topics than teachers do. This fact shouldn't be threatening but exciting, as it opens up new opportunities for students and teachers to learn together.

Let's say a student in your class has a particular aptitude for technology and created a beautiful project using iMovie or Prezi. As a teacher, you were blown away by the artistry of the final project, but you feel ill equipped to teach other students to use the tool. Rather than freak out or force yourself through a crash course, why not ask that student to lead a Lunch and Learn session or even a class lesson on the technology? Empower the student to share his or her expertise for the benefit of the whole. Everyone wins, and students grow to see their teacher as a person who is open to suggestions—a stark contrast to the traditional role of the teacher.

This shift isn't necessarily easy or instantaneous. In fact, just as it can be difficult for teachers to cede control, students may find it hard to take control. To create a classroom of experts, you'll need to instill qualities of independence and self-advocacy in your students, a cumulative process that takes time to yield results.

Building Independence

Empowering students as experts means that they need to gain some control of their learning. The traditional education system tends to break down natural curiosity, training students to behave and learn in a way that prioritizes what's best for teachers over what's best for kids. Often, teachers control too much in the classroom, rendering students paralyzed and struggling to generate their own inquiry.

By contrast, cultivating an atmosphere that encourages "failing forward"—that is, one that sees mistakes as opportunities for growth rather than as closed-ended failures—increases students' engagement and awareness of their strengths and challenges and opens up endless opportunities for students and teachers alike to grow. Such an environment builds trust in and enthusiasm for the entire learning process

rather than just the topic of the moment. It makes learning exciting by opening it up to infinite possibilities.

By creating classroom cultures that embody these qualities, educators can develop confident risk takers who are interested in innovation and in developing their own minds in ways that work for them. By cultivating individual growth in addition to covering content, teachers can give students the chance to follow their ideas and collaborate without fear of retribution or failure.

Developing Self-Advocacy

With a growing culture of independence, educators also need to instill in students a sense of self-advocacy—that they must know themselves and push to get their needs met in the ways that work best for them. This doesn't lessen the importance of the teacher's role, although some may see it that way; on the contrary, teachers are more important than ever in this context. They will be addressing students' specific needs whenever they arise rather than delivering wholesale, one-size-fits-all instruction.

Self-advocacy skills can be taught, and they should be as soon as students enter school in kindergarten. Along with questioning in general, these are crucial skills that will serve students well throughout their lives. As advocates for their own learning, students should know when they need help and how to get it. The teacher's role is to be receptive by providing help in ways that meet students' individual learning preferences. Thus, the teacher's goal is twofold: first to make sure that students can articulate their needs and then to try to meet those needs to the best of his or her ability.

Peer Feedback Fosters Growth

Because feedback is a reciprocal process, only a truly self-aware student can effectively evaluate peers and provide feedback. The relationship between the giver and the receiver of feedback develops both students as learners, helping them become more astute judges of their own learning. Asking the right questions, sharing information, identifying

challenges, and providing strategies all work together to deepen students' mastery.

Traditionally, the teacher has been the sought-after expert in the classroom, the only person capable of providing students with the feedback they need. If we shift our mindset, we realize that we have *many* experts in the room who can help peers along in their learning. We can teach students to ask clarifying questions or point out inconsistencies, but the really important part is teaching the student who is asking for help to be specific in what he or she is looking to gain from the feedback.

One of my students reflected that asking her peers for help was a great way to grow:

> While working on this assignment, I was able to complete some of the following skill levels. During the week, we were asked to partner up with a peer and peer-review each other's plays. This skill allowed me to develop my honesty and understanding of what others can write and how others see my work. By sending someone else my play and reading theirs, I was able to get some new ideas off of them, and they pointed out my mistakes.

Giving students this responsibility is not without its pitfalls. Students don't always step up to the challenge and may falter in their ability to help their peers. There can be many reasons for this, but it often comes down to one of two things: a lack of individual student agency or interest or unclear expectations and follow-through from the teacher. Understanding where the breakdown happened and then finding a solution for the particular problem is important. The feedback process isn't designed to happen in a vacuum; the challenges that arise can actually strengthen students' learning, collaboration, and leadership skills. In the following section, a student recalls the sometimes messy experience of being editor-in-chief of her high school newspaper.

Three years ago, as a high school senior, I was given the honor of being the editor-in-chief of the *Blazer*. During this vital transition from one stage of my life to a much bigger one, being on the newspaper staff motivated me to have a voice. Not only was I able to improve the precision of my writing, but I also published articles on topics I found interesting, strengthened my ability to give constructive criticism, and learned the value of collaboration.

As editor-in-chief, I had the privilege of forming an everlasting bond with my adviser. The idea was for her to take a hands-off approach to allow student leaders to develop their skills, but without her assistance, I would not have learned how to give good feedback or be a good leader. No one wants to hear that their work is subpar, but there's a gentle and effective approach to addressing ways of improvement. I chose to hold one-on-one meetings as often as possible because I found in-person communication to be more genuine and sensitive. This technique also allowed me to listen to other writers and improved my confidence in actually being heard. It's easier to dismiss a digital comment than one given directly.

As with any team project, creative disagreement sometimes arose. In one instance, a reporter questioned my leadership abilities and ignored my feedback. At first, I was angry with this staff member. I found his opinion audacious, especially because it was never directly expressed to me. Conflict is intimidating. I was unsure how to fix the dissatisfaction in a productive way but felt it my responsibility as a leader to do something. Taking a step back to analyze the situation, I concluded that this was not something I had to do alone and that I shouldn't allow another's words to hurt my confidence in my abilities. My adviser's confidence in me and support during and after the incident encouraged resolution, which we reached after several heartfelt discussions. Although this also meant the resignation of the staff member, moving forward, the remainder of the team and I had more open communication.

Despite my leadership role, I was not the holder of all knowledge. I was a student, just like my peers, and I believe that this conflict showed them that my priority was growth, not power. Teamwork is a leadership skill; it kept me grounded during a time when my ego could easily have become inflated by my position as editor-in-chief.

My role as a leader did not come to an end when I walked across the stage at graduation. Now nearing the end of my junior year of college, I have held a Resident Assistant position for three semesters and will be returning as an RA next year. This role requires leadership, collaborative, and organizational skills and entails conflict and time management,

completion of administrative tasks, and more. During my initial interview, I was asked to discuss a time when I resolved a team conflict, and I passionately explained the above instance. I may not have earned the position solely because of my background in collaboration and conflict resolution, but I definitely would not be where I am today without my experience at the *Blazer*.

Academically, I have been complimented on my writing style. Professors have commented on my "effective rule breaking," and I believe this stems from needing to be concise as a journalist. I've been unafraid to approach professors with questions about their comments in large part because of the practice the newspaper provided. In addition, I feel confident in participating in peer review because the process truly does enhance the end piece. Feedback doesn't necessarily have to be a scary thing. It can be given with the best intentions and creates a great opportunity for growth.

—Deborah Kosnar

Deborah's story is not an uncommon one. When teachers allow students to resolve conflicts and take control of situations, they grow in ways both intended and unintended, making the classroom a richer, more meaningful place to learn. To create such a dynamic learning space, however, the classroom must provide a safe, supportive culture in which students feel free to take risks and fail—a topic explored in Chapter 2.

Reflection Questions

1. What changes would you need to make to allow students to take the necessary risks in your class?
2. What are some unintended consequences of growth, and how can you build on them in the future?
3. If you're not seeing student leadership emerging in your classes, what are the biggest roadblocks?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Starr Sackstein started her teaching career at Far Rockaway High School more than 14 years ago, eager to make a difference. Quickly learning to connect with students, she was able to recognize the most important part of teaching: building relationships. Fostering relationships with students and peers to encourage community growth and a deeper understanding of personal contribution through reflection, she has continued to elevate her students by putting them at the center of the learning.

Currently a Teacher Center Teacher and ELA teacher at Long Island City High School in New York, Starr spent nine years at World Journalism Preparatory School in Flushing, New York, as a high school English and journalism teacher where her students ran the multimedia news outlet WJPSnews.com. In 2011, the Dow Jones News Fund honored Starr as a Special Recognition Adviser, and in 2012, *Education Update* recognized her as an outstanding educator. In her current position, Sackstein has thrown out grades, teaching students that learning isn't about numbers but the development of skills and the ability to articulate that growth.

In 2012, Sackstein tackled National Board Certification in an effort to reflect on her practice and grow as an educational English facilitator. After a year of close examination of her work with students, she achieved the honor. She is also a certified Master Journalism Educator through the Journalism Education Association (JEA). Sackstein also serves at the New York State Director to JEA to help advisers in New York better grow journalism programs.

She is the author of *Teaching Mythology Exposed*: *Helping Teachers Create Visionary Classroom Perspective, Blogging for Educators,*

Teaching Students to Self-Assess: How Do I Help Students Grow as Learners?, The Power of Questioning: Opening Up the World of Student Inquiry, Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School, and, with Connie Hamilton, *Hacking Homework: 10 Strategies That Inspire Learning Outside the Classroom*. She blogs on Education Week Teacher at "Work in Progress" where she discusses all aspects of being a teacher and education reform. She co-moderates #sunchat as well as contributes to #NYedChat. She has made the Bammy Awards finals for Secondary High School Educator in 2014 and for blogging in 2015. In speaking engagements, Starr speaks about blogging, journalism education, throwing out grades (as in a recent TedxTalk), and BYOD. Most recently, she was named one of ASCD's Emerging Leaders, Class of 2016.

Balancing a busy career of writing and teaching with being the mom to 10-year-old Logan is a challenging adventure. Seeing the world through his eyes reminds her why education needs to change for every child. She can be reached at mssackstein@gmail.com or via Twitter as @MsSackstein. Or find her on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/MsSackstein.

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