

When used effectively, feedback promotes student ownership in artmaking by encouraging students to inject originality, persist, and improve. Feedback from teacher, self, and peers can also provide students with motivation.



## “Is This Okay?”

### Developing Student Ownership in Artmaking Through Feedback

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**I**dread going to my Secondary Two art class. I feel like a weary warrior fending off arrows that fly furiously in my direction. While walking down the corridor, I can hear the students shouting and tables banging in the art studio. Bracing myself, I open the door. Ian charges toward me, shoves his work into my face, and asks, “Is this okay?” Before I can see what lies in front of me, Roy shouts from across the room, “Dave says my artwork looks awful. What should I do?” In the far corner, Ken lets out a loud yawn, asking, “Is this work going to be graded?”

How am I supposed to respond to these questions? My students seem to need constant guidance and look to me, the teacher, for approval and feedback. They appear to lack initiative and ownership of their artwork. How can I engage them to think, reflect, and make decisions about their artmaking? What role can their classmates play in providing suggestions? These questions led me to consider the role that feedback plays in my classroom. In this article, I explore my students’ understanding of the idea of ownership,

observe how feedback influences their ownership of the artmaking process, and discuss how they helped me learn to provide better feedback in the classroom.

#### Unpacking the Concept of Student Ownership

O’Neill and Barton (2005) define ownership as “a complex, multifaceted process that captures the relationships that students build between themselves, as youth and as learners, with the subject they aspire to participate in and with

the context in which that participation takes place” (p. 292). They identify four elements of student ownership: “Having control over the learning environment, connecting with and personalizing the learning process, expressing territoriality, and being involved or invested in one’s learning” (p. 294). These elements echo the four criteria that Swick (1999) proposed for detecting ownership in students: personal investment, engagement, responsibility, and empowerment.

Figure 1 (above). Characters created by previous students used in class discussion.

## The Role of Feedback

Feedback is a teaching strategy that takes place constantly during a lesson. Feedback can promote ownership by empowering teachers and students to give their best to enable learning (Heritage, 2011). Feedback that focuses on more than one aspect of learning—the product, process, and progress—yields maximum benefit to students. Feedback, according to Fluckiger, Vigil, Pasco, and Danielson (2010), must be specific, simple, descriptive, and focused on the task so as to help students set clear expectations and facilitate successful decision-making. Scarcella (2003) proposed the following characteristics of effective feedback:

- Clear, useful, and timely
- Supplemented with instructions
- Provides information on both strengths and weaknesses
- Helps students to convey their intentions accurately

## Feedback Provided to Students in the Classroom

I noticed three types of feedback in my classroom: teacher, peer, and self. Teacher feedback, written or verbal, is a consequence that follows a student's action and has a positive influence on the student's future performance (Konold, Miller, & Konold, 2004). "Sensitivity is important as is the relationship between the teacher and learner" (Dinham, 2008, pp. 35-36); teachers must strike a balance between knowing when to push students to excel and when to be sympathetic and encouraging in order to boost the students' confidence. Peer feedback is a powerful and instructive tool that promotes communication, teamwork, and professionalism in learning—as long as the feedback is constructive (Senger & Kanthan, 2012). Peer feedback benefits those providing the feedback and those receiving it. By analyzing their peers' work according to the same criteria they use to reflect on their own work, students deepen their understanding as they learn to "internalize the learning goal and progress indicators in the context of someone else's work" (Heritage, 2011, p. 19). Students themselves also play an active role in feedback when they engage in a continuous loop of self evaluation based on given criteria (Fluckiger et al., 2010). Self feedback

is an important skill that intrinsically drives students toward the goal of self improvement (Senger & Kanthan, 2012).

## Using Feedback in My Classroom

My study of the use of feedback took place during a Sculpey character-modeling unit conducted over three lessons. My 24 students are a varied group of Singaporean Chinese teenage boys. While some are quiet and diligent, some are impatient, restless, bored, and disengaged. The students' task was framed by an open-ended art problem that harnessed the boys' interest in fantasy characters from movies, animation, and games: *Through the juxtaposition of common everyday items, design and create a character that shows a transformation from ordinary to extraordinary.*

To generate a checklist for self feedback based on the quality of work that I was expecting, we spent the first lesson discussing memorable characters from Disney Pixar, Studio Ghibli, and characters created by previous students. The class identified and agreed upon three main criteria that make a good Sculpey character: mastery of medium (e.g., textures and details), imaginative ability (e.g., how the character looks), and problem-solving skills (e.g., the character can stand upright).

To provide opportunities for feedback, I started and ended my lessons with group critiques. As the class gathered to survey what their peers had done and share opinions about their work, I was conscious of the way I provided feedback. I held myself back from giving generic comments such as "Great progress!" or "It doesn't look good. Redo." Instead, I made efforts to point out specific strengths and weaknesses based on the agreed-upon criteria. I also provided guiding questions to consider during critiques:

- Which feature of the work stands out most for you? Why?
- What did you learn about the materials during the process of handling them?
- What problems did you face in making your model a freestanding structure?
- How did you resolve those problems?

To encourage peer feedback, I paired students to dialogue with each other during the artmaking process. Students were encouraged to share techniques that worked and thoughts about their peer's work. Having

a peer partner meant that the students had someone seated next to them to consult and discuss ideas with instead of approaching me for comments constantly. Students were also asked to keep an individual reflection log to note the progress of their work and feedback given.

## Portraits of Student Ownership During the Character-Modeling Unit

Over the three lessons, I listened to my students' dialogue, recorded my feedback, and read my students' self reflections to determine how feedback impacted their behavior and ownership. I also interviewed students after the completion of the three lessons. I share my discoveries in the following section.

### Roy<sup>1</sup>

**Written reflections.**<sup>2</sup> "When I first sketched my character, some of my classmates accused me of trying to copy the character from *Toy Story*—Woody. Although I like Woody very much, I did not intend to copy. Therefore, I decided to modify my

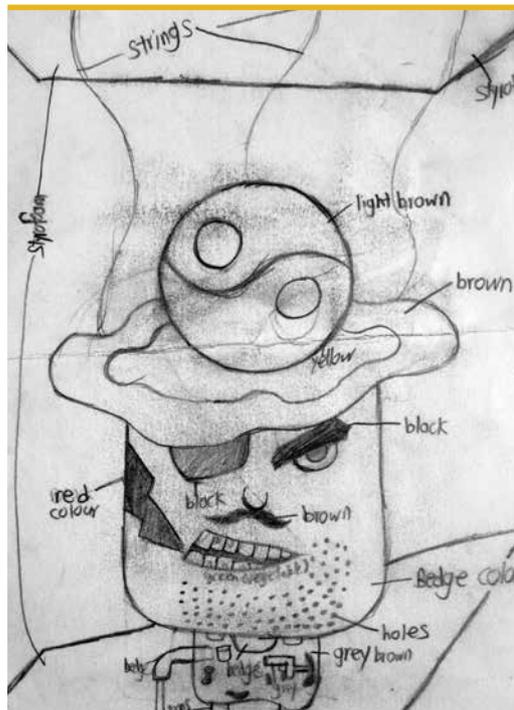


Figure 2. Roy's sketch of his character.

character so that I wouldn't be accused of such a thing."

Peer feedback initiated Roy's motivation to be original in his work.

### Interview.

Me: "I noticed that you remade the hand at least three times. What made you do that?"

Roy: "The hand keeps dropping, and you say it looks like a [beef] patty."

Me: "You reworked because of my comment?"

Roy: [Pause] "I want to do well... it's quite fun... and also I want to get a good grade. I even came back twice during the holidays to work."

Me: "I see. How will you decide your work is done?"

Roy: "When I meet all the criteria. First, you have to make a monster, then you need to have texture... then, you need to make it stand... and fourth... it must look nice."

My (teacher) feedback motivated Roy to improve the hand of his character.

### Class observations.

Me: "Have you noticed how Roy's character has changed?"

Roy: "I tried and tried, but then it doesn't balance, so I reconstruct again."

Me: "The addition of the hand is a very good improvement. It makes the character look interesting and keeps it stable."

Roy: (*Smiles and heaves a sigh of relief.*) "I think I need to make a base because this thing is very flimsy. It might drop" [referring to the hand of his character attached without any support of an armature].

Me: "What else can you do?"

Roy: "Add wire, but it's very difficult because it's stuck already."

Ian: "Eh, yes, adding a base would be, like, very weird."

Me: "Think about how the base will affect the appearance of the work, then decide. Meanwhile, let me show you how wires can be added."

I drew a sketch and explained how wires could be attached for support. Roy listened, returned to his seat, and attempted to make a base. After fiddling with the base for 10

minutes, he ripped the hand off and remade it with support wires.

Roy had rushed to complete his work without much regard for quality and constantly approached me for approval. I was pleasantly surprised by Roy's persistence and commitment to the completion of his work. Peer feedback pushed him to be original. By modifying his character so that it would not resemble Woody, Roy demonstrated Zander's (2003) point that student talk "provides a rich source of different perspectives" (p. 127). Through peer feedback, he learned how his work was perceived from a different perspective and tweaked it to ensure a level of uniqueness. I see this drive for originality as Roy's responsibility toward his artmaking, a sign of ownership.

Through Roy, I observed a close relationship between feedback, motivation, overall improvement, and ownership of the artmaking process. My comments recognized his efforts and motivated him to improve his character. Brookhart (2008) observed the power of feedback to address both cognitive and motivational factors. When feedback contains information that the student can use, engagement in learning



Figure 3 (left). Roy's completed character, Big Hand.

Figure 4 (above). Roy working on his character.

improves. Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridian (2007) shared that teachers “spoke to students explicitly so as to keep them on track, to keep them engaged” (p. 42).

Self feedback was also important for Roy. To determine whether his character was complete, he compared his work to the checklist and examples. Stiggins (2008) argued that when teachers help students understand what good work looks like at the start of the lesson, students learn to “self assess by comparing their work to that standard of excellence so as to see the differences, and help students learn how to close the gap between the two” (p. 4). When Roy realized his work fell short of his expectations, he invested time and effort to improve it.

### Ian

**Class observations.** I eyed Ian from the other end of the table. He was swirling Sculpey like a pizza, rolling it up like a burrito and slicing it into coils, and then twisting the coils and cutting the squiggly forms into smaller pieces. He swung into full action after I highlighted the use of

textures as “interesting features” to add to their characters. The other boys edged a little farther away as Ian focused on his antics, making strange noises as he worked. An hour later, looking pleased, Ian whipped out his phone and took a picture of what he had just created.

Me: “I like the way you added textures, but it could be too much. Consider where you want to focus.”

Shaun: “Yes, it looks like chickenpox.”

Ian fiddled with his crablike work, added eyes and a mouth, followed by coiled rings to the legs.

Ian: “Do you think they look nice?” (*Pointing to the rings.*)

Roy: “Eh, it looks weird. Damn weird. I think the rings are very ugly.”

Mark: “I agree. I like your original one.”

Me: “When you work, ask yourself, ‘If I add to the character, does it work?’ Also ask yourself when to stop.”

Ian stared at his work for a while before he removed the rings and started working on a new character. A combination of peer and teacher feedback prompted Ian to modify his character as he progressed.

### Interview.

Me: “What do you understand by taking ownership?”

Ian: “It’s something like pride in your work, like telling others loudly that I made it.”

Me: “Do you think you have exhibited that in your work?”

Ian: “When I look at my work, I think: ‘It doesn’t look right, let’s change it.’ I went to look at everybody’s work and nobody got something like mine, so mine is likely to catch people’s attention. I put in effort, too.”

Me: “How can you tell if someone has put effort into his work?”

Ian: “It’s like you can invite someone to take a hammer, and pretend to smash it and see how they react. If they don’t really care, you can smash it and it’s all right.”



Figure 5 (above). Ian’s initial treatment of textures in his work.

Figure 6 (right). Ian’s completed character.

Figure 7 (far right). Ken’s completed character model.



Ian usually would not stay focused on a task for long. He is messy and likes to defy conventional ways of artmaking. For Ian, taking ownership of his work means taking pride in creating original artwork and putting in effort to continuously improve. He took initiative to adopt a spontaneous approach to his artmaking and immersed himself in the process of play and experimentation after I shared some Sculpey modeling techniques. Ian's approach demonstrated Gude's (2010) call to surrender to the process of artmaking and "make a commitment to be actively and seriously engaging the materials and forms while simultaneously remaining loose and experimental" (p. 32). Teacher and peer feedback provided Ian with insights, but he made the final decisions. Hetland et al. (2007) stated that students, by developing the habit of self evaluation, learn to "become independent workers and become able to self monitor so that they can eventually be autonomous" (p. 66). Ian's enjoyment showed that he was in control of his artmaking; he had put in effort and was proud of his work.

### Ken

**Class observations.** Ken sat quietly in a corner, working on his character. He did not participate much in the critiques but chatted with Bob during the lesson.

Me: "You'll need to work faster to complete the work."

Ken: "Okay. I know what I want to do, so it's just some corrections here and there."

My (teacher) feedback prompted Ken to monitor his progress.

### Interview.

Me: "What feedback did you receive?"

Ken: "I asked Bob if it looks okay. And he said yes. Not bad. Got a lot of spikes. Looks damn cool."

Me: "Why were you unable to complete your work?"

Ken: "I've remedial and have a lot of forgetfulness and laziness. I do other things and time just flies. And I just miss the deadline."

Me: "How do you intend to complete your work?"

Ken: "Got to stay back tomorrow and Saturday. Otherwise, I'll take a big piece of Sculpey home to work."

Me: "How can I help you?"

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Ken: "Like what you are doing. Talking to me. Then impose a deadline. Like, say, after next Monday, no more marks."

Frequently late for lessons, Ken often appeared sleepy and inattentive. He failed to complete his character by the stipulated date. Instead, he came back to complete the work over a weekend after the deadline. Ken stated that ownership is "you having control over what you want to do, instead of follow strictly

the rubrics." For Ken, teacher feedback did not appear to impact ownership in a positive way. Instead, my comments seemed restrictive; he saw them as an exercise of a teacher's authority, threatening to punish him for failing to complete his work. Ken felt more comfortable sharing his work with his best friend, who gave him positive encouragement for his work. In his self reflections, however, he was able to identify behaviors that hindered his progress and developed a plan to complete his work.

### Learning From the Feedback Experience

As I paid attention to the interactions that took place, I heard stories of persistence and frustrations that influenced ownership of my students' artmaking. My experiences emphasized the significant role that I, the teacher, play in establishing a conducive learning climate for my students—by providing the right kind of feedback and also facilitating peer and self feedback.

It is important for feedback to be given in the right amounts and at the right time. By giving Ian room for expressive experimentation, he was actively involved in determining the direction of his work. According to Douglas and Jaquith (2009), students





Figure 8. Characters complete with color by Roy and Ian.



work toward greater mastery when they have interest and are given opportunities to pursue their own ideas. Instead of reining him in with constant checks, timely feedback encouraged Ian to be engaged and seek improvement.

Teachers also have to model thoughtful responses to artwork so that students can learn how to better respond to their peers' work (Szekely, 1988). I was reminded of this when I commented that Roy's work looked like a "beef patty," and some of his classmates began to use terms such as "pancake" and "chicken feet" when talking about his work. I have to check myself and model appropriate feedback. Feedback should not elicit ridicule.

Teacher feedback should be viewed as suggestions that can be accepted or refuted based on the students' evaluation of how it contributes to their personal intentions for their artwork. During the unit, Roy noted that my feedback mattered "because you're the one marking it! Then I just follow like following instructions." Ken saw my words as threats for punishment. Both felt obliged to listen to me, as they perceived me as the final decision maker in the classroom. Such perceptions negate student ownership because when the students rely on my judgment, they do not think critically about their artwork.

In considering teacher feedback, Zander's (2003) advice that "good teachers know when to push and when to hold back" (p. 128) proved helpful. Hattie and Timperley (2007) also observed that students and teachers need skill in the provision and reception of feedback. Many factors must be handled sensitively—the establishment of the classroom climate, dealing with the complexities of multiple viewpoints, encouraging self motivation, and "exquisite timing to provide feedback before frustration takes over" (Hattie & Timperley, p. 103). Although feedback is valuable, Zander pointed out that silence is important at times for both teacher and students. "This often involved knowing when to refrain from offering or imposing opinions in order to encourage student exploration" (p. 117). For feedback to promote student ownership in the classroom, teachers need to adopt different approaches to manage behaviors and motivation so that their comments truly benefit students.

## Conclusion

When used effectively, feedback promotes student ownership in artmaking by encouraging students to inject originality, persist, and improve. My discoveries are not new, but they serve as a timely reminder for teachers, including myself, about the power of feedback. Use feedback regularly and constructively to motivate and guide students. Use feedback to help students understand alternative viewpoints and guide them to make effective decisions with useful advice. Indeed, feedback is a persuasive tool to empower students in their artmaking journey.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.
- 2 All written reflections, interviews, and observations are from 2012.

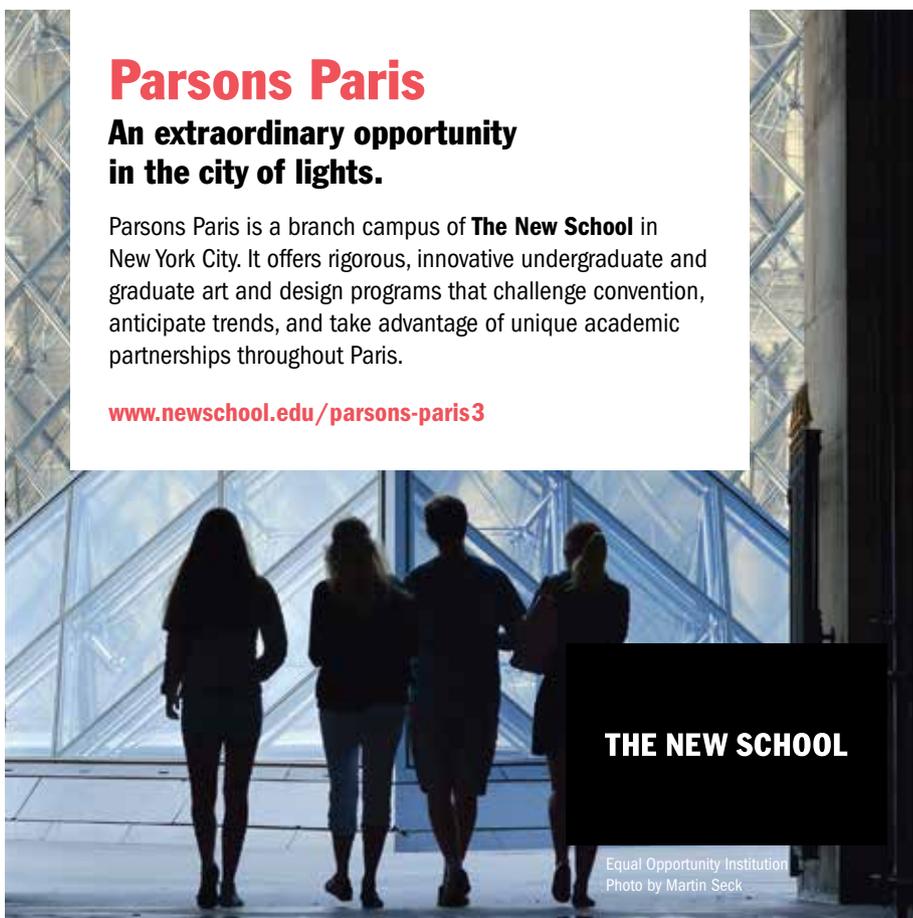
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