

Sadler's Gap-Closing Model of Feedback

Category: Assessment, Feedback and Learning

Sadler's gap-closing account explains formative assessment as action that reduces the distance between a learner's current performance and a desired standard. For learners to participate, they must understand the standard, compare it with their own work and possess strategies for changing the work.

Feedback information alone cannot close the gap. Learners require evaluative expertise: a developing capacity to recognise quality, make reasoned comparisons and regulate production. Some complex qualities are partly tacit, so experience with exemplars and judgement is essential ([Sadler, 1989](#)).

Gap-Closing Conditions

1. **Understand the standard:** Develop a sufficiently rich conception of the desired quality or goal.
2. **Inspect current work:** Gather and attend to relevant evidence about actual performance.
3. **Compare:** Identify significant differences between current and desired performance without oversimplification.
4. **Choose an action:** Use strategies or tactics capable of reducing a prioritised difference.
5. **Reappraise:** Examine revised performance and refine judgement, strategy or understanding of quality.

Examples in Practice

A student compares a draft critical review with contrasting exemplars, identifies that sources are reported separately rather than synthesised, reorganises one section around competing claims and checks the revision against the understood standard.

Why It Matters

The model locates learners inside the assessment process rather than treating them as recipients of comments. It shows why criteria, exemplars, self-assessment and opportunities for revision matter: each supports the knowledge, comparison or action required for improvement. The gap is not always a simple deficit: learners may need to reconceive the purpose, question the standard or develop an entirely different strategy for future work ([Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006](#)).

Further Reading

6. Sadler, D. R. (1989). [Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems](#). *Instructional Science*, 18, 119–144.
7. Sadler, D. R. (1998). [Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory](#). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 77–84.
8. Nicol, D. J., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). [Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice](#). *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199–218.

Related Terms: Formative Assessment | Feedback Uptake | Evaluative Judgement | Self-Regulated Learning