

To understand why the effects they find in different studies are so variable, both Kluger and DeNisi and Ruiz-Primo and Li look for factors that make feedback more or less effective, and they find no simple answers. Kluger and DeNisi propose that the reason for this is that the only thing that really matters about feedback is the kind of reaction it triggers in the recipient, and hardly any of the studies they reviewed look at this.

Kluger and DeNisi suggest that when individuals are given feedback, they can do one of four things: change behavior, change the goal, abandon the goal, or reject the feedback. The problem is that—for some of these responses at least—whether the response is desirable depends on the context. For example, changing behavior is, presumably, desirable when the learner is falling short of the goal he or she has set. We want learners to increase effort in order to achieve the goal. But changing behavior is not desirable if the learner has already achieved the goal; we do not want learners to ease off and apply less effort because they are doing well. Instead, we want the learner to change the goal, by increasing aspiration and aiming for a higher goal. But changing the goal is undesirable if learners are falling short of the goal they already have; we do not want students saying, “I was aiming for an A, but I’ll settle for a B.” It is also, of course, undesirable if learners abandon the goal (“math is stupid”) or reject the feedback (“my math teacher is stupid”). This is why feedback is so hard to get right. As shown in Table 5.1, when students are given feedback, eight things can happen, and six of them are bad (the two desirable responses are shown in bold).

Table 5.1: Reactions to Feedback, After Kluger and DeNisi (1996)

	Feedback indicates that performance	
	Falls short of goal	Exceeds goal
Change behavior	Increase effort	Reduce effort
Change goal	Reduce aspiration	Increase aspiration
Abandon goal	Decide goal is too easy	Decide goal is too hard
Reject feedback	Feedback is ignored	Feedback is ignored

The only thing that matters with feedback is the reaction of the recipient. That’s it. Feedback—no matter how well designed—that the student does not act upon is a waste of time. This may seem obvious, but hundreds of researchers have ignored this basic truth, and tried instead to find out whether feedback should be immediate or delayed. Should it be specific or general? Should it be verbal or written? In the remainder of this chapter, we look at how to make feedback more effective, but ultimately, it comes down to the simple truth that the most effective feedback is just feedback that our students actually use in improving their own learning. We will explore ways in which you can increase the likelihood that your students use the feedback that you provide. While the quality