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Constructive Feedback Builds Confidence

Amanda Yskamp, M.A.

Abstract

The role of a teacher or teaching assistant is to give a fair, clear, respectful evaluation of students’ work in a way that is most readily understood and taken to heart. A positive approach to feedback, one that addresses both strengths and weakness with clarity and humor, is more effective as it builds confidence and encourages students to be more involved in their writing process.

Constructive Feedback Builds Confidence   
 For the past several years, the chief focus of my work has been evaluating students’ writing and providing constructive feedback. As a teacher in two highly respected distance education programs, I embrace the interchange of ideas and written responses that allows for experimentation and development. It’s not always easy for students to put themselves out there, to reveal their feelings or make themselves vulnerable, especially if they believe they will be judged or that they will fail. My goal is to encourage students to be adventurous, to try new approaches and techniques, and to take each assignment as an opportunity for the attempt. I often remind students that the word essay comes from the French “to try.” Each essay assignment provides the chance for some new challenge or attempt. The writing process itself allows for less than successful attempts, I remind them. They don’t call them rough drafts for nothing. Pencils come with erasers. I trot out all the reassurances I can think of. I make my instructions detailed, my responses to their work clear, fair, direct, and buffered with praise and humor.

I cannot say enough about the role of praise and humor in feedback and instruction. Students can hear only a certain amount of criticism before shutting down. My own children are like this. If they cannot hear it, then pointed criticism is worthless. I’ve found for written responses, the sandwich method works well. You start with a nice piece of bread, by talking about what works, what is appealing or effective in a particular piece of writing. Then, you can begin to approach some of the flaws, with direct, but gentle language. This middle section constitutes the filling, the meat and cheese, or, for the Vegans in the group, the Portobello mushroom and sprouts. The end of the response, the second slice of bread, does not negate the issues touched on in the middle; it provides encouragement, instruction, concrete advice, and leading questions to help in developing students’ writing skills and furthering their inquiries.

In an average week, I write scores of letters of response to my students’ writing. In my role as a distance education instructor, I ensure that these responses contain not only feedback on the particular piece (fiction, poetry, essay, memoir, etc.) but also broader lessons in whatever technique or approach the student has attempted. Though I believe in revising and polishing individual pieces, I think it’s more valuable to consider each piece of writing as necessary precursor to the next, all in the course of developing a voice, learning about structure, mastering rhetorical devices, strategizing, etc. As is so often true, students learn by doing, and they need to get back on that proverbial horse and ride….that is, write!

Focusing on students’ strengths empowers them to approach more flawed areas with energy and insight. In support of my application, I am including an example of a response I wrote to a private student I worked with a couple of years ago. She wrote this essay for an introductory college English course, and although there were many parts to praise, the essay itself was unsuccessful. My response to her was fairly detailed, especially as I felt she had missed some necessary instruction on composing comparison essays, but I offer this letter as characteristic of my work. I feel this letter reflects the kind of care, attention, respect, and appreciation I try to express through all of my written encounters with students.

Please see below.

Dear Felicia,

You’ve got lots of wonderful detail in this essay. What needs work, as you’ve probably gathered, is the structure. I completely sympathize with your method of constructing an essay, because yours is similar to what mine was at a certain time. I was always being told my essays were “impressionistic.” Well, perhaps they were – and perhaps this one is too. I didn’t realize that in many ways, structure is the easiest part of an essay. It’s just the blueprint for the delivery of information and, well, impressions. The clearer and more obvious the structure is, the easier it is for your reader to read the essay. This makes everyone HAPPY.

With this assignment you have a few projects to attend to. You need to show how two scientists are motivated (the nature of their passion) – similarities and differences. You need to show the content of their studies (how each attends to the study of violence) similarities and differences. And you need to make your own appraisal about violence and about scientific inquiry.

One way to approach this is a simple comparison essay. Let’s say Lockwood is A, and that Horgan is B. You can then organize your information as follows:

Introduction:

State what your project is, in a few sentences, eg. That you’re going to explore two scientists with a passion to learn about violence and the human condition.

Attend first to Lockwood, A:

A: Motivation

A: What he discovers along the way

A: Challenges

A: Why he keeps going

A: What he finally concludes

vs.

Horgan, B:

B: Motivation

B: What he discovers along the way

B: Challenges

B: Why he keeps going

B: What he finally concludes

Conclusion: something about the nature of scientific inquiry, violence as a root cause/effect, passion for a subject or some combination of these.

But this is just one option.

Other possibilities include alternating your focus between scientists, such as

Motivation A then B

What is discovered A then B

Challenges A then B

[Always maintaining the same order – so it’s clear.]

Another possibility is to group the similarities and differences together.

So, for example,

similarity #1 A, B

similarity #2 A, B

difference #1 A, B

difference #2 A, B

etc.

Does this make sense?

When I was reading your essay, although I found the voice strong and the information compelling, I wasn’t sure where you were taking me. You can avoid this by saying outright what you intend to show. Something like, “The events of Lockwood’s life seem ironic given the focus of his scientific studies. His teacher was killed… etc.”

I would suggest that you draw up a plan for your revision, then go back to your essays and see if you can find the necessary quotations to fill in the spots for your comparison. I wish I had the texts in front of me, but I don’t. All I can do is emphasize that a clear structure suggests clear thinking (which may or may not be true.) I know how insightful and clear-headed you are, despite the more “impressionistic” approach you have here. Your job is fairly straightforward from here. If any of this is unclear, or if you have any questions, let me know.

Amanda

Felicia Malone

Thompson

To Solve War [HMM. IS THIS WHAT THIS ESSAY IS ABOUT?]

[Have you ever been so obsessed with something that you can’t think of anything else? Does it worm its way into your life, until you, quite literally, live for your obsession? Scientists are driven to explore and discover by the same passions, that we all obsess over. Their fascination comes from a quest for knowledge, but more than that, the need to understand of the human race, and through that, themselves. Richard Preston describes it in his introduction to 2007’s, “Best Science and Nature Writing.” He says scientists “share an intellectual passion for what they’re writing about, a fascination with the subject matter as well as the human characters in they’re [THEIR] pieces” (Preston xiv). A common motivation for scientists is trying to understand violence.] [MAYBE NOT THE STRONGEST WAY TO BEGIN. UNLESS YOU WANT TO ADDRESS THE WHOLE ESSAY TO “YOU,” WHY NOT BEGIN WITH A MORE DIRECT DISCURSIVE TONE, “FOR SCIENTISTS TO DEVOTE THEIR ENTIRE LIFE TO ONE FACET OF EXISTENCE, THEY MUST BE MOTIVATED BY A PASSION….AS RICHARD PRESTON DESCRIBES IT IN HIS INTRODUCTION……” “TWO SUCH SCIENTISTS WHO SHARE A FASCINATION FOR BOTH THEIR SUBJECTS AND THE UNDERLYING HUMAN CHARACTER ARE LOCKWOOD AND HORGAN. THEIR PASSION IS TO UNDERSTAND THE ROOT CAUSES OF VIOLENCE.]

Jeffrey A. Lockwood earned a Ph.D from Louisiana State University in the 1980’s. During his time there, he spent a great deal of time studying gryllacridids (an insect that looks like a cricket or a grasshopper) in the college research laboratories. He was astounded by the “unmitigated ferocity” of these creatures. “Gryllacridids attack in order to live,” he explained. “Lifting their wings to appear larger and thumping their abdomen against the ground like a war drum, they launch themselves at any intruder. Their gaping, sickle-shaped mandibles leave no doubt that they intend to inflict as much damage as possible, and the largest species can leave a deep gash in a persons hand” (Lockwood 115).

His study on the insects was inspired by his Teacher, Jeff LaFage, who made a huge impression on Lockwood during his time at university. In his essay “The Nature of Violence,” it is clear he looks up to Dr. LaFage not only an excellent professor, but as a person as well. He was a “demanding and kind teacher, a true scholar and Renaissance man—studying the evolution of termite society, collecting Tiffany Glass, and hosting a baroque music program on public radio” (Lockwood 116). [HOW RELEVANT IS THIS TO YOUR ESSAY?]

Dr. LaFage [is what ] prompted Lockwood’s interest in gryllacradids. It started out as an interest and grew into an obsession. Lockwood spent hours and hours in the labs studying these creatures. He moved to Australia to do a more intensive study on them. Once, attempting to see them in their natural habitat, Lockwood spent all night in a bush trying to see them in their natural habitat. [SHOWS THE EXTENT OF HIS PASSION. DO YOU HAVE A SIMILAR ANECDOTE ABOUT HORGAN?] He failed to see any. The more he studied them, the more he became fascinated with their nature. His long hours in the lab conjured a relationship with the gryllacradids. [I LIKE YOUR USE OF THE WORD “CONJURED” – VERY EVOCATIVE OF THE KIND OF MAGIC INVOLVED.]

After accidentally injuring one, Lockwood explained that, “A globule of yellow streaked fat oozed through the gaping wound. (The gryllacridid) then curled its head down toward the leaking viscera and proceeded to consume its own entrails.” [WHOA! BUT AS INTERESTING AND GROSS AS THIS IS, DOES IT SERVE TO ILLUMINATE WHAT YOU’RE DISCUSSING? HOW DOES HE SEE HIMSELF OR HUMANITY IN THIS? THIS ISN’T REALLY AN EXAMPLE OF VIOLENCE, BUT OF SOME OTHER SELF-CANNIBALISM.] He began to see himself—and all of humanity—in these creatures with such capability for violence. “For we ultimately shared a defining reality: the capacity for animate relationality—for striking out in fear, attacking in anger, and writhing in pain” (Lockwood 120). [THIS IS A GREAT POINT, BUT I’D LIKE TO SEE THE GRYLLACRADID EVENT THAT PROMPTED THIS.]

[THIS SEEMS TO COME OUT OF THE BLUE. IF YOU WERE TO SHOW THE LINKS – AS NOTED ABOVE – ““The events of Lockwood’s life seem ironic given the focus of his scientific studies. His teacher, Dr. LaFage was shot….”]

Dr. LaFage was shot in the head by an angry youth. “He was escorting a female colleague when a mugger grabbed her purse. This woman became tangled in the strap, and Dr. LaFage stepped between them and said, ‘Don’t hurt her, you can have her purse”’ (Lockwood 121). And then the youth turned and shot him.

Dr. LaFage had done nothing to anger him. “But what the angry, scared youth needed could not be given at the point of a gun, in a fleeting moment, on a New Orleans sidewalk. For the essentials of human life are not limited to bodily needs. And robbery is not always about material gain” (121-22).

Through his grief, Lockwood realized that although he had learned much about brutality from his study of these insects, he would never truly understand the nature of violence. Lockwood was trying to discover human nature, but realized that the quest was hopeless. Although he may have tried to continue his quest, he had reached a conclusion. The conclusion was that violence, and in association, war, is never going to end.

[Not all scientists find the answer they are looking for, but that doesn’t mean they’ll discontinue their quest. ] [THIS IS CERTAINLY TRUE, AND CAN WORK AS A “TURN” IN YOUR ESSAY, BUT NEEDS A BIT MORE DEVELOPMENT. WHAT IS IT THAT KEEPS SCIENTISTS GOING IN THE FACE OF FAILURE?]

John Horgan is a scientist/journalist who wrote, “The End of Science.” In his book, he explained that science had reached its peak. He thought that although we could continue to explore and study the world around us, there were no more breakthrough discoveries to be made. We have already discovered atoms, DNA, and the universe. He makes his point by stating, “The greatest barrier to future progress in science is past success. Scientific discovery resembles the exploration of the earth. The more we know about our planet, the less there is to explore” (Horgan 62).

Obviously though, he [ has ] [HAD] no wish to retreat from his study of science. He will [WOULD, ETC.] continue to study it, and encourage others to study it. [What is making him hold on? Is it just the unwillingness to let go to a lifetime of dedication?] [GOOD QUESTIONS, BUT MAYBE COULD BE INTEGRATED INTO THE REST OF THE ESSAY.]

The answer, however, is no. At the end of his essay, “The Last Frontier,” Horgan states why he refuses to let go. While he doesn’t think there are a significant number of scientific mysteries out there left, he believes there is still one fundamental thing that is not solved. And that thing is war. “War research—perhaps it should be called peace research—would seek ways to avoid conflict. The long term goal would be to explore how humanity can make the transition toward permanent disbarment: the elimination of armies and the weapons they use. What could be a grander goal? In the last century, scientists split the atom, cracked the genetic code, landed spacecraft on moon and mars. I have faith—yes, that word again—that scientists could help solve the problem of war. The question is how, and how soon. Now that would be an ending worth celebrating” (70).

At the core of his essay was the question of how humans could have made these huge leaps in understanding the world, but not understand one of the most basic things about themselves? His obsession with solving the question of war was his motivation to continue studying science. [GOOD. ]

In studying science, they were both looking at a bigger picture. Horgan was not just pondering the end of science, and Lockwood was not just writing about gryllacradids. Their plea’s [PLEAS] for knowledge were clear at the end of they’re essays, Horgan and Lockwood both were looking for human nature. They were both trying to understand themselves, and humanity as a whole. More specifically, they were trying to comprehend and solve our biggest flaw: violence. [GREAT! BUT THIS GETS A LITTLE BURIED. WHY NOT BE PUT THIS TOWARDS THE BEGINNING OF THE ESSAY TO HELP SHAPE THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR COMPARISON?]

Horgan and Lockwood both reached different conclusions. Lockwood realized that he would never really understand violence. He accepted it as something that could not be changed, it would never cease as long as people lived on this earth. Horgan was more hopeful: his conclusion was that one can not give up, we must continue the search for the source of it. [Scientists are fueled by different things, in this case war. But underneath it all, they are trying to understand themselves.] [THIS FEELS LIKE A REITERATION. WHAT HAVE YOU DISCOVERED IN THE PROCESS OF THIS INQUIRY? WHAT ARE YOUR OPINIONS ABOUT SCIENTIFIC STUDY? ABOUT VIOLENCE? ABOUT A LIFE LED IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE?]