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Preparing Students to Engage With Teacher Feedback

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For students to benefit from teacher feedback, either in the short term to improve a draft or in the long term to improve as writers, students need to engage with the feedback (Lira-Gonzales et al., 2021; Zhang & K. Hyland, 2018). Thus, simply receiving feedback is not sufficient to improving student writing; students need to be invested enough in the process of improving their writing to read and implement it. Some students do not engage with teacher feedback due to affective factors (Mahfoodh, 2017). If students have strong emotional reactions to teacher feedback, or if the feedback contradicts their attitudes, beliefs, or goals, students may disengage from it (F. Hyland, 2003; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). It is important, therefore, for teachers to acknowledge and respect the emotional labor of receiving feedback while helping students develop or refine positive emotional reactions to teacher feedback. In this teaching tip, I provide suggestions for preparing students to receive feedback by debriefing their past positive and negative experiences with feedback and encouraging positive future reactions.

Context

This approach was designed for adult first- and second-language writers in university courses (e.g., first-year composition, graduate writing courses) and intensive English programs.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will be able to acknowledge and examine their own emotional perceptions of teacher feedback.
- Students will be able to engage with teacher feedback by utilizing emotion-regulating strategies.

Format

This learning activity takes place as an in-class discussion.

Teacher Preparation

Brainstorm past negative and positive experiences of receiving feedback on your own writing. This could be feedback from former teachers, parents, friends, colleagues, reviewers, editors, and so forth. Feedback experience descriptions should include:

- the context in which the feedback was provided;
- one or two illustrations of the feedback as best as can be remembered;
- the initial emotional reaction that accompanied the feedback; and
- the ultimate result of engagement with that feedback (e.g., Did you take up the feedback, ignore it, improve because of it, completely skuttle the writing project?)

Estimated Time

This activity takes 30–45 minutes of class time.

Procedure

1. Introduce the topic of engagement and emotional response to students in your writing class. Do this perhaps by reading from the

introductory paragraph from this teaching tip or pulling ideas from the cited research in the “References” section.

2. Express your own emotional reaction and subsequent (dis)engagement with a writing task by offering two examples of receiving feedback. Start with a negative example—one in which the feedback you received shut down your writing or revising process. Move next to a positive example in which you engaged with feedback and revised successfully because of a healthy emotional reaction to feedback. It is important to stress that emotional reactions can change over time; initial reactions of anger and frustration can evolve (sometimes with the help of meditation, food, or venting) into respect and appreciation for honest feedback. You may offer insights into your own feedback-processing approach.
3. Ask students to write about two of their own feedback-receiving experiences after considering what you just shared. One experience should be negative and the other positive. Students should also begin crafting their own feedback-processing approach or strategies.
4. Ask one or two students to share their negative and positive experiences with the class or break students into pairs or groups to share.
5. After students have expressed their experiences, distribute the hand-out (in the Appendix) that suggests options for responding to feedback. Ask students to identify two or three strategies that they currently use or that they would consider using to regulate their emotions in preparation for future feedback events.

Caveats and Alternatives

- Be sure to prepare fully for a conversation on emotional/affective reactions to feedback. Students may have horror stories of bad feedback experiences. Anticipate this and even mention it to students so they know the purpose of this activity is not to excoriate specific teachers but to discuss emotions in a healthy way.

- For some students, feedback will continue to be a painful, intractable issue even after discussing positive emotional reactions to it. Be sensitive to the fact that some past experiences cut extremely deep. In fact, this discussion may bring up issues of victimization associated with feedback episodes, so be prepared to offer contact information for professional counseling services, which teachers should have available as a matter of course.
- Some students may discuss feedback experiences that reveal situations in which they have experienced racism, marginalization, and lack of equality. These can be opportunities to discuss larger issues than feedback and to encourage all members of the class to see and respect diversity.
- Alternatively, assign some or all of this activity as homework. Introduce the topic in class or via online instruction, and then ask students to complete their responses and read the handout at home. Ideally, teachers will still debrief the experience with students in person or online via a learning management system or even a video platform, such as Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>).

References

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Appendix

Approaches for Managing the Emotional Work of Receiving Feedback

Receiving feedback on one's writing can be an emotionally charged experience. If you are not eager for the feedback, or if the feedback contradicts your perception of your writing, or even if there are too many or too few comments, the experience can leave you angry or disappointed. But strong negative emotions do not do much to help you improve in your writing. In fact, they generally do the opposite. They may shut down your desire to revise or improve your work, or they may lead you to make changes that you dislike or disagree with. Either way, your paper may not improve, and you may suffer as a writer.

So, what can you do to mitigate strong emotions when you receive feedback on your writing, particularly if it is negative? Consider using some of these emotion-managing approaches and strategies:

- Read feedback in a quiet, safe place in which you have time to process it carefully. Scanning feedback quickly while talking to friends or transitioning between projects can make the feedback seem worse than it is.
- Ask someone else to read the feedback and provide a quick, positive initial summary.
- Talk with others about the feedback you received; ask them to help you prioritize it and make plans for addressing it.
- Categorize the feedback you receive by placing each suggestion onto its own row in a table. In the next column, type out ideas for addressing the feedback.
- Identify the amount of feedback you really feel capable of addressing. Maybe you can do everything your feedback provider suggests; maybe you can only address 20% of it. Identify how much you can handle, and then leave the rest for another time.
- Color-code or order the feedback by difficulty to see how many comments you have that would be easy to address, how many are medium,

and how many are hard. Make a plan for balancing your revisions: perhaps address the easy ones first to build momentum or maybe work on all the hard ones first to get them out of the way.

- Highlight the positive comments in your feedback; share these with friends who can help you celebrate your successes.
- Remind yourself that feedback is opinion based. Teachers, peers, and tutors are just offering their perceptions about what will make your writing better; yet those perceptions may be inaccurate, shortsighted, or poorly expressed, so do not treat them like absolute truth.
- Talk to the feedback provider. If your teacher wrote comments that are hard to understand, that are confusing, or that are painful, ask your teacher to clarify them. You can also ask your teacher for suggestions when revising, which may make the extra effort to talk with your teacher especially valuable.
- Leave your feedback alone for a few days, particularly if your initial reaction is bad. The extra time allows you to approach the feedback from a different emotional space.
- Reread your writing after receiving feedback. Try to see your writing from the feedback-provider's perspective or reread your writing as if it were written by someone else and you had provided the feedback.
- Keep the positive comments in mind if your feedback is particularly glowing. Savor the feelings of accomplishment that come from writing something that another person found effective.
- Find someone who can provide more or better feedback if your feedback provider offered insufficient or inadequate comments. This person might be a peer, friend, tutor, or another teacher. Feedback is an intensive labor, so consider ways that you can give back to the person who agrees to offer additional feedback. Offer to review something of theirs or buy them a cup of coffee.
- Practice intentional breathing when you get particularly anxious about feedback. Breathe in deeply, hold the breath for five seconds, and then exhale slowly.

- Turn to positive emotional releases to deal with strong reactions to feedback; this might include food, sleep, time with friends, or sports. Find a way to process your emotions productively so that you do not internalize the lie that because you received feedback on one piece of writing that your writing is bad in general.
- Rewrite the feedback in your own words using phrases that are positive and upbeat and that encourage rather than discourage revision.

Once you feel neutral or even positive about making suggested revisions, take advantage of this opportunity and truly engage with the feedback. You are likely to improve your paper in the short term and become a better writer in the long term.