

“Learning to Praise”: A Look at Praise in Peer-Written Feedback

Katelyn Pfaff

WRD 582

November 22, 2016

“Learning to Praise”: A Look at Praise in Peer-Written Feedback

Peer writing tutors assume multiple roles when they sit down with another writer's work - reviewer, editor, reader, writer, student, peer - and they must “be clear about what [they] are meaning and doing when engaging in such ubiquitous but ill-defined tutor tasks of ‘monitoring’, ‘helping’, or ‘providing support’” (MacLellan, 2005, p. 203). They must understand and enact the particular nuances that define the peer tutor-student writer relationship: she must protect her identity as ‘peer’ and not ‘instructor’ by reminding the writer that her feedback is suggestion; she must protect the instructor (when applicable) by toeing the line between sympathizing with the writer and also maintaining a sense of respect toward the instructor; and she must do all of this while creating and maintaining a calm, familiar atmosphere in which the writer feels comfortable asking questions and taking risks. While doing all of this, the peer tutor must also review a particular set of writing, create an agenda of concerns, balance that agenda with the writer's agenda, and provide the most constructive, clear, and efficient feedback to the writer - all within a strict time frame. Nor are tutors given a formulaic ‘feedback sheet’ from which to design their feedback; rather, they must work on the spot to create organized, clear responses, drawing on several suggestions from handbooks, training guides, and their own experience.

A mere thirty years ago, peer writing centers belonged to a young discourse. The tutor tasks listed above had not yet been fleshed out and examined for purpose. As North points out in 1984, “most of our assumptions about peer tutoring are based on experience, reflection, and speculation - not [yet] on formal inquiry” (Matsushashi, Gillam, Conley, and Moss, 1989, p. 298). In the thirty years since North's claim, however, the discipline has flourished – annual conferences, volumes of collected essays, and blogs on how to most effectively organize and operate a peer writing center for the benefit of tutors, writers, and instructors abound with critical

thought and research. There are now major voices in the field, among them Donald A. Daiker (1989), who has been a seminal influence in this field of study. In his article “Learning to Praise”, Daiker reviews the discussion focused on the use of praise in instructor feedback by commenting on several heavily-involved research projects from the 1970s, most of which find a general lack of praising comments in instructor feedback and a heavy emphasis on critical, more negative language. By outlining the brief history of this kind of research as well as some first-hand accounts of the effects of praise, Daiker lays the groundwork for his main argument; his closing line reads, “It’s a good bet that genuine praise can lift the hearts, as well as the pens, of the writers who sit in our own classrooms” (112). This line functions as the groundwork for this brief research project as well, as we look at the ways in which peer tutors use praise in their written feedback at the DePaul University Center for Writing-based Learning (UCWbL).

At the UCWbL, peer tutors are instructed to provide both positive and critical comments to their writers. According to the UCWbL handbook (2014), praise (positive feedback) performs two main functions: 1) that of pointing out to the writer what they are doing well, so that they may build on that strength for future projects, and 2) to ‘soften the blow’ and avoid overwhelming a writer when delivering criticism (p. 94). The latter purpose invokes an issue of morality in that this kind of praise - that only given to assuage more critical comments - is oftentimes disingenuous. Therefore, many peer tutoring centers – the UCWbL included - stress the need to be genuine in providing not only their most critical comments, but especially when providing praise. By providing a writer with genuine praise, by pointing out exactly what in a paper is working well, we are achieving several things: increasing student motivation toward revision and starting new projects, boosting confidence in writing across genres and disciplines and in being active members of classroom discussion, and helping writers understand and

internalize effective strategies for future projects. In other words, by spending time pointing out what's working well – by giving genuine praise – we are equipping writers with the tools necessary to grow as a writer in any discipline.

The following pages explore a set of 20 written feedback responses by peer writing tutors at the UCWbL, each examined for the presence of praising language. What this paper attempts to do is establish a framework for looking at praise based on experts in the field, examine the actual presence of praise in a small sample of written feedback, and outline a more efficient way of approaching praise in peer tutor feedback.

Literature Review

Perhaps the most useful for our discussion here is Effie Maclellan's (2005) article "Academic achievement: The role of praise in motivating students," in which she foregrounds her discussion of praise in feedback by stressing the importance of motivation as a driving factor in student behavior and growth. For the peer tutor, then, she says that "[t]he need for tutors to be able to harness their understanding into practices that relate motivation to achievement is a perfectly reasonable one" (p. 195).

Citing Dweck, she outlines two major strains of intelligence theory - entity theory and malleable theory - to describe the very specific kind of praise tutors should be providing their writers. The entity theory assumes that ability and intellect are fixed. If performance is a direct reflection of intelligence, then one must achieve flawless performance every time. In this way, intelligence and performance are valued over learning and effort becomes unnecessary (because a person either has the ability or doesn't). Failure signifies a lack of intelligence and writers therefore avoid risk or difficult tasks for fear of failing. Under this category, she defines 'person feedback' which focuses on the writer in a global sense and states that 'person praise' - i.e.

“You’re a good writer” - “would appear to leave students extremely vulnerable” (p. 201). In other words, by connecting praise directly to a person’s identity and not to external strategies or writing elements that exist outside the writer, tutors are actually doing writers a disservice and generating an unhealthy view of writing, growth, and failure.

Malleable theory, on the other hand, views ability and intelligence as incremental and within the writer’s control to develop. Learning is valued over performance and effort and risk become necessary components of developing one’s ability and intellect. Failure signifies a misused strategy or a lack of effort on the writer’s part, but assumes room for growth and revision. Maclellan then links this theory to ‘process feedback’ and ‘process praise’, in which tutors focus their comments on specific strategies or text-specific elements that the tutor deems effective. Writers who fall under this malleable theory of intelligence and writing are also less likely to inflate their achievements when talking to peers than those who receive ‘person feedback’, signifying a healthier relationship with their own writing skills and processes.

Instructor-based research finds a rich set of data in ESL learning, and, fortunately, many of its theories and findings are also relevant to the peer tutor-writer dynamic. Hyland and Hyland’s (2001) article “Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback” grounds its research in the close observation of two ESL teachers and their students over a complete academic course, reviewing 4700 words of summary comments on written feedback. They categorize the feedback they examined in three ways: praise, suggestion, and criticism, noting that the most effective use of all three of these comes in the order of praise-criticism-suggestion. This order of execution, they claim, spurs the student toward revision and improvement, though the feedback in each category must be specific enough for the writer to understand and internalize. By situating praise at the forefront of this equation, Hyland Hyland might be

suggesting that it carries the most weight or is more effective than criticism in feedback. Or, to follow Bean's (2011) model of 'strengths-summary of problems-recommendations for revision', making praise step one might only achieve the effect of 'cushioning' or 'softening the blow' for the more critical comments that follow.

Methods

For this brief overview of the function of praise in peer-written feedback, 20 samples of written feedback were collected from 20 different tutors of various age and gender. They were all written in Spring Quarter of 2016, which ensures that most tutors had been trained (which usually occurs in Fall Quarter) and had had at least one other quarter of practice in incorporating both positive and critical comments in their feedback.

Each sample was reviewed in two components: marginal comments were counted as individual feedback units, and summary comments were treated as a single unit in which multiple feedback units worked together to provide a fluid, cohesive revision strategy. The function of each of these sections is made clear in the UCWbL handbook: "Marginal comments allow a peer writing tutor to ask clarifying questions, challenge the writer to consider how a reader will approach a specific part of the project, [and] offer text-specific praise" (p. 85), whereas summary comments should follow Bean's (2011) "three-step template: (1) strengths, (2) summary of a limited number of problems, and (3) recommendations for revision" (p. 334). In each of these guidelines, the position of praise is reversed, appearing at the end of the list for marginal comments but at the beginning for summary comments. Therefore, it can be said that praise in marginal comments is meant to point to text-specific instances of effective writing - a well-structured sentence, a strong transition, or a correct citation - whereas praise in summary

comments might be meant to point out a pattern of strengths or positively comment on the thesis, direction, or research involved in the paper overall.

In analyzing the following data, I focus on each section individually and collaboratively to determine the overarching presence of praise in peer-written feedback.

Findings & Discussion

For the sake of the discussion below, I begin by defining praise in the parameters of this project as any feedback that consists of positive language and is directly related to a writer's work. A tutor expressing gratitude toward a writer for sharing their writing - which occurs in every case examined below - does *not* fall under the category of praise, but is rather used as a rapport-building strategy. Another common use of positive language is prevalent at the end of feedback, in which most tutors wish the writer good luck in the revision process; however, this is also a familiar rapport-building strategy and exists solely in that category.

Of the twenty samples collected, only 10% were without some element of praise. This statistic in itself is extremely encouraging, as it proves that 90% of tutors in this sample incorporated praising language for one purpose or another into their written feedback. Broken down into marginal comments and summary comments, this study found that of the 359 marginal comments collected from the samples, only 38 (or 10.58%) contained elements of praise. This suggests that marginal comments were used mainly as a place to point to text-specific weaknesses. Of the 7,144 words of summary comments in this sample, only 566 (7.92%) were words of praise, suggesting again that this space is devoted primarily to prioritizing weaknesses and strategies for revision.

Also within these summary comments were notes from the tutor that related to the tutor's own academic work. These comments often sounded like, "As someone that's studying biology

and will soon take chemistry courses, I enjoyed reading through your paper!” or “It’s an intriguing topic and it is something I would like to explore some more in my own work” (Table 1). Though this language is positive, it should not be considered praise. Instead, I classify these examples as another rapport-building strategy, a necessary component to any tutoring appointment if the writer is to trust and use the feedback he or she is given by the tutor. I point this out to signify the difference between *positive language* and *praise*. Each, I believe, are important elements of feedback, but they fundamentally achieve different purposes: the former, of establishing trust with the writer in a friendly, personal way, and the latter, of marking specific instances in a writer’s work in which he or she employs an effective strategy.

It is oftentimes easier to identify process praise than person praise, and one should be careful when extracting comments such as those in the Appendix tables out of context and examining them for purpose. It is worth noting, however, that many moments of praise in both marginal and summary comments use ambiguous evaluative language (“good”, “great”) that, though positive in sound, does not point to anything specific about a writer’s work. When providing feedback of any kind, it is one of the tutor’s tasks to be extremely deliberate and precise when choosing their words. If we use unclear, ambiguous terms to describe an effective strategy or moment of strength within a writer’s work, we run the risk of writers not fully understanding the characteristics of their work. Put another way: if we, as tutors, spend a great amount of time and energy mulling over our feedback strategy, the language we use should be working in its most efficient manner. This might be easier said than done and mostly likely takes practice, but it is worth noting. The clearer we are, the stronger our writers will be.

The numbers from this brief study aren’t quite as startling as those Daiker and others found in their research from the 1970’s; after all, most papers here contained some form of

praise. However, the wide discrepancy between comments of critical feedback and comments of praise establishes the exigency to be more consciously aware of the ways in which we approach praise. If we are to believe Daiker and assume that pointing out to a writer what they have done correctly and efficiently is necessary to their growth as a writer, then I believe it is time we devote more training and practice to the art of giving praise.

Application to Peer Writing Tutors

For peer writing tutors specifically, this data and analysis should prove how important an issue providing genuine praise in written feedback is, and should take away from these numbers a dedication to incorporating more and more text and strategy-specific praise (or ‘process praise’) in their comments, both marginal and summary. In approaching the task of giving praise, I think we could all do well by noting its place in our agenda, to make it something we are more consciously aware of in all stages of the appointment (preparation, appointment, reflection/writing a log). Administration might focus one or two core readings on the effects of genuine praise on student motivation and growth and the differences between person praise and process praise. Finally, I believe a reframing of the task of giving praise might be in order, and might follow along these guidelines:

- a) First, that all praise - no matter its purpose or location - should be completely genuine.
- b) In as much, it should not manifest itself as ‘person praise’ but ‘process praise’, where feedback is focused entirely on text and strategy-specific examples so the writer may recognize a strength, internalize it, and employ the same strategies or techniques in future projects.
- c) Praise should aim to create an atmosphere of familiarity where the writer is encouraged to take risks and play on his or her strengths.

- d) Every writer displays at least one strength in any set of writing. It is our responsibility as tutors to help them recognize it.

This data combined with Maclellan's theories can also serve peer tutors themselves. By recognizing that the strategies we employ during tutoring appointments exist outside of our actual identities, by keeping them external to ourselves, we are more able to test them, tweak them, and completely ditch them when they're not working. Because every writer is different and will require slight or major variations of strategy and approach, we should go into each appointment knowing full well that strategies may fail, but that we can still demonstrate strength and resilience by quickly adjusting to another strategy or approach.

It is not my intention here to create a new task for tutors to add to their already incredibly full agendas. Rather, I argue that this task already exists in that agenda but not in its fullest, most effective form. By remaining consciously aware of the effects of praise on writing and growth and of the careful differences between person and process praise, I believe that our appointments – whether written feedback or face-to-face – can accomplish so much more for our writers.

Bibliography

- Bean, J. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, K., Coughlin, E., Dietz, L., and Pearson, M. (2014). Working with writers by providing written feedback. *How to UCWbL Handbook*, 3, 77-98.
- Conley, R., Gillam, A., Matsuhashi, A., and Moss, B. (1989). A theoretical framework for studying peer tutoring as response. *Writing and Response*, 293-316.
- Daiker, D. (1989). Learning to praise. *Writing and Response*, 103-113.
- Hyland, F., and Hyland, K (2001). Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10, 185-212.
- Maclellan, E. (2005). Academic achievement: The role of praise in motivating students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6, 194-206.

Appendix

Table 1: Praise in Marginal Comments

| | Total Marginal Comments | Total Praise Comments | Examples of Marginal Praise |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Sample A | 7 | 0 | -- |
| Sample B | 7 | 0 | -- |
| Sample C | 8 | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a great point! What would build a stronger argument... • This is a good start to your topic sentence – now takes this a step further... |
| Sample D | 30 | 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I really like the way you have painted this scene for your reader. • Right. This is spot on. So what is “normal” to you is not at all “normal” to them. This is good. • I think this whole paragraph presents very solid evidence. You continue to do a fine job of painting the picture of the situation there. |
| Sample E | 22 | 0 | -- |
| Sample F | 12 | 0 | -- |
| Sample G | 21 | 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I thought this was a very clear, well-defined thesis statement. • I thought citing these actual numbers really made a strong point in support of your argument. • I feel like this is an excellent point, but you might want to save it for your conclusion. • While I’d work on the exact wording, I thought this was a nice sentiment to end on. |
| Sample H | 11 | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think this is a really clever point though. I would love to read a body paragraph with this topic being the focus. |
| Sample I | 51 | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like how you kept this sentence concise, but still wrote a complete sentence. ☺ • I think this sentence helps explain the previous SWOT points. |
| Sample J | 13 | 0 | -- |

| | | | |
|----------|----|---|--|
| Sample K | 2 | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It's so nice to be able to provide some feedback for your paper today, as I always enjoy working with your writing. |
| Sample L | 23 | 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I think this is a great variety of approaches! ● Well done on the structure of this paragraph! You Make a great point with a clear explanation and provides a real-life example from your classroom, so that seems to fulfill the prompt. ● Sound logic. |
| Sample M | 42 | 0 | -- |
| Sample N | 7 | 0 | -- |
| Sample O | 12 | 0 | -- |
| Sample P | 17 | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intriguing insight, well done! :) |
| Sample Q | 29 | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I really enjoy that you added a description at the beginning of what large competition is. I was further able to understand what you were talking about and add it to my vocabulary as I continued to read through your piece! |
| Sample R | 13 | 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listing skills you learned is good. What might make this even stronger... |
| Sample S | 17 | 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I like that this paragraph lays out what you will talk about throughout the rest of the paper! ● Nice observation! I didn't even notice that when I read the letter. ● I like how your ending brought everything together! |
| Sample T | 15 | 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Okay so this is good analysis, but... ● Interesting analysis here, and good tie-in to your thesis. |

Table 2: Praise in Summary Comments

| | Total Summary Comment Word Count | Total Words of Praise | Examples of Summary Comment Praise |
|----------|---|--------------------------|---|
| Sample A | 333 | 0 | -- |
| Sample B | 109 | 17 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As someone that's studying biology and will soon take chemistry courses, I enjoyed reading through your paper! |
| Sample C | 621 | 25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have some really strong ideas in your paper about the possible challenges of working as a costume technician for a production of Cloud 9. |
| Sample D | 273 | 112 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I really enjoyed reading your work. I am a teacher myself – I teach junior high at a school down the street here in Lincoln Park – so I really enjoyed your story and your thoughts. I also enjoyed your take on education, and on forming the minds of young people. I think your thoughts are very mature, and are spoken like somebody who clearly has spent time in a school. |
| Sample E | 153 | 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was interesting to read your thoughts on what makes a good leader. |
| Sample F | 187 | 0 | -- |
| Sample G | 415 | 21 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall I felt like you made a lot of interesting and relevant points, and now the task is mostly to organize. |
| Sample H | 356 | 0 | -- |
| Sample I | 246 | 15 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In regards to grammar I did not notice any major repetitive patterns, so nice work! |
| Sample J | 276 | 55 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, great work on the paper! I feel that you have a good idea of where you are going with it, but it's only a matter of fleshing it out and polishing it up before submitting. It's an intriguing topic and it is something I would like to explore some more in my own work. |
| Sample K | 403 | 28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It looks like you've done a lot of work here to gather and organize the experiences you've had and the talents you've developed into a thoughtful cover letter. |

| | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|--|
| Sample L | 336 | 106 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the whole, I can tell you've been very meticulous about making sure you're meeting each requirement, and I think these fulfillments are particularly strong due to the clear structure/organization of this paper. You explained your overall philosophy and approaches to teaching and provided some clear examples that proved to me that you most definitely abide by this philosophy. |
| Sample M | 555 | 31 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think a lot of your research is very intriguing, and it seems like you have a good grasp on what you want to say based on all of your analysis. |
| Sample N | 493 | 25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It looks like you're off to a good start, and you have a pretty well established idea of where you want to take your draft. |
| Sample O | 272 | 10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the most part your grammar was correct Good work... |
| Sample P | 368 | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have a great start on this draft--you summarize both works concisely yet thoroughly. |
| Sample Q | 782 | 15 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am really interested to see how your arguments are evolving and becoming more specific. |
| Sample R | 254 | 26 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I can tell that you are very passionate about biology! It showed through your many experiences, as well as the enthusiasm with which you wrote this. |
| Sample S | 147 | 25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think you are off to a great start on this draft. I found your draft to be very organized and follow a logical path. |
| Sample T | 565 | 28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think you've done a good job of drafting a creative thesis--of the translations representing societal change--so now the bulk of your revision should focus on defending that. |